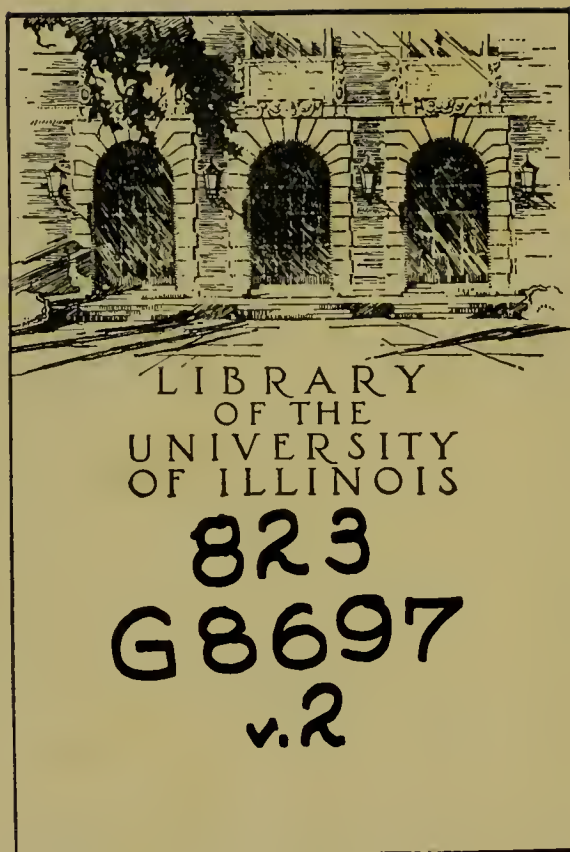


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GREYMORE:

A Story of Country Life.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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GREYMORE:

A STORY OF COUNTRY LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

MATERNAL COUNSELS.—THE RETURN.

THOUGH Philip kept his word and never made any further attempt to gain Katharine's affection, she was not therefore exempt from all annoyance with respect to him.

Mrs. Thorpe soon discovered that some change had taken place in her son's sentiments; he now carefully avoided Hazel Bank; and when he and Katharine met there was a painful reserve between them, which must have been evident to any one who took the least interest in either of them.

Henrietta Brooke, when asked her opinion, said that she was glad to see Philip was coming to his senses, and finding out that Katharine would never care for him; he was merely showing his spirit in avoiding a girl who scorned him.

“Scorned him!” This solution did not add to Mrs. Thorpe’s contentment, and she could not let the subject rest; so one evening, when she and her husband were sitting with Mr. and Mrs. Rivers round a comfortable fire at the Grange, whilst the young people were amusing themselves in another room, she alluded to Philip’s altered demeanour, his low spirits, and Katharine’s apparent caprice. The result of this conversation was a summons to Katharine from her mother the next morning to a private conference.

Mrs. Rivers was not much of a lecturer, and Katharine had no gloomy forebodings when she followed her mother to her bedroom. She thought that some doubtful question had arisen respecting Fanny’s frocks, or the packing of the box that was to be sent next day to Charlie, and that her opinion was required.

She was, therefore, a little surprised when Mrs. Rivers, after carefully shutting the door, thus commenced—

“Katharine, you really should not behave in this way; both your papa and I are seriously displeased that your aunt Thorpe should have to say such things of you.”

“What does she say, mamma?” asked Katharine, turning first very red and then very pale, and wondering how much her aunt knew of what had passed between Philip and herself.

“She says that you are making Philip very un-

happy by appearing to care for him one day, and casting him aside the next; she says, what, indeed, we have all known for some time, that Philip is much attached to you, and that it is time the affair should be brought to a close, which your uncle says likewise."

"It is settled as far as I am concerned, I am sure, mamma," said Katharine. "But what did you answer to all this?"

"I took your part, Katharine, on the grounds that before Philip had made you an offer he had no right to expect any decided mark of liking from you, but must be satisfied to remain in some little uncertainty about your feelings until he had explicitly declared his. This is what I *said* for you, Katharine; but I cannot help feeling in my own heart that your aunt had some foundation for her accusation, and that at present you are acting towards Philip with unnecessary coldness. You did not always treat him so."

"And was anything more said, mamma?" asked Katharine. "Please tell me all."

"A great deal more: your father agreed with what I said, and then your uncle said, that on the point of Philip's caring for you there could be no doubt, and that from the first he had approved of his choice. That there might be no further uncertainty about the matter, he made a formal proposal for you on Philip's part; and your father having accepted it, providing

your feelings were not opposed to it, your uncle undertook to tell Philip that your consent was all he had to gain."

"But suppose Philip should decline to make the proposal?" said Katharine.

Mrs. Rivers looked up quickly, and instantly read the truth.

"You have already refused him, Katharine," she said; "are you sure you have done wisely in rejecting a man like Philip on your own responsibility?"

"I could never love him," said Katharine.

"You do not know that: Philip is one whose worth grows upon you with time, and you could hardly find one who would show you more tender devotion."

"Dear mamma, I assure you, Philip is rather terrible than tender, and I should be almost afraid of him. You do not any of you know what Philip is. I did not tell you the other day; I thought it was no use making a fuss about it. His father and mother think they can mould him as they will; they meddle with his affairs, and plan for him in a way that is really unjustifiable, I think, and they will find themselves mistaken. Philip will be fiercely angry when he knows what they have done."

"I can imagine that he will be vexed when he finds they have been proposing to us what you have already refused. But I did not want to talk of

Philip so much as of you, Katharine. I cannot think that you have seriously, entirely given him up. Your aunt spoke in a way that grieved me of your coquetry; perhaps it was in this kind of spirit that you refused Philip, and, though I should be sorry that you have acted so, all might yet be as we wish."

"Philip will never ask me again," said Katharine, firmly.

"Would you wish him?"

"No, mamma, not for the world."

"But what do you object to in Philip?"

"Mamma, we do not suit in any way. How can I explain? You know one cannot like all people alike. I am sure you would not wish me to promise what I do not feel."

"Certainly not, but love is a strange thing; you would look upon Philip differently after a time, supposing, of course, that your affections are disengaged."

"Of course," said Katharine, blushing vividly; "but it is not like you, mamma, to talk in this cold way. I am sure you do not look upon what I mean in the light of silly romance, as some people do."

"No; I don't think you are romantic in your notions, generally; from the accounts I hear, you are more likely to be flippant and changeable. You are accused of giving encouragement to different people and then casting them aside; and my attention has

been called to many points that certainly deserve blame."

"It is too bad to accuse me to my own mother," said Katharine; "and aunt Thorpe thinks of no one but Philip. At any rate, I refused him at once, and did not try to keep him dangling after me."

"But that refusal, Katharine, I cannot exactly comprehend; I know what you mean by saying that you and Philip do not suit. He does not care for many things that you do, but his indifference is more from habit than anything. He is not wanting in either intellect or taste, and you would soon lead him to take interest in the same things as yourself."

"I should not like to *lead* my husband," said Katharine; "besides, Philip is too stern for me to lead him at all."

"You should not fancy," pursued Mrs. Rivers, "that a person who likes the same music, and poetry, and pictures as you do, would therefore be a happy and suitable one to live with. A very different sort of harmony is required."

"Indeed, mamma, I am not imagining anything so frivolous, though these things go for something, I should think."

"And you must not imagine that because a person can speak generous and noble sentiments in an eloquent voice, that he would act up to them. Philip Thorpe, though he says little, has a more truly noble

heart than many who can express themselves in flowing sentences.”

Katharine was now blushing deeply, almost angrily, but she made no answer. She was inexpressibly mortified at hearing from her mother opinions so much resembling those of her aunt Thorpe, though couched in a more refined form.

Mrs. Rivers continued :

“ You must not fancy either, Katharine, that an affection like Philip’s is to be met with every day ; and you must not expect that those who seem perhaps to suit you better, and who talk in a way you like to hear, who sympathise with you in your tastes, and flatter you by an appearance of greater appreciation than Philip shows, are to be depended upon, in the long run, as he is. Real tenderness is generally shy and retiring, and you must not take the appearance of interest for more than it means.”

“ Oh, mamma ! ” exclaimed Katharine, looking appealingly into her mother’s eyes. The appeal was not made in vain.

Mrs. Rivers dropped the strain in which she had been talking. In truth, her sympathies were with Katharine, however necessary she might deem it to speak sage truisms, in fulfilment of her promise made to her husband and Mrs. Thorpe. She liked and esteemed Philip, but if she guessed the secret of Katharine’s heart, she could make full allowance for it, and enter sufficiently into her nature to under-

stand that it was possible she might prefer another person to Philip Thorpe. When she was young herself, one like him would never have touched her heart. Katharine resembled her in most of her tastes and feelings, and even when the mother strove to condemn, she could not repress a latent sympathy with what she censured.

“Well, Katharine, my poor child, I don’t think you deserve all that is laid to your charge; only remember this, in future we must not have any frivolity or trifling. If Philip should speak to you again, reflect upon all his worth and his steady affection, and then answer him decidedly one way or another. Your father will be astonished, more astonished than I am, to find that you reject him, but he will not attempt to influence you. Only, you must of course be aware that this affair will cause great disappointment, perhaps some coldness in the family. However, I need not say anything of that; it will not and ought not to influence you; but if you should find out that your first decision was hasty, you know that a contrary one will give us all great pleasure.”

“But you are not so anxious to part with me, surely, mamma?”

“No, my child, God forbid. Neither of us is at all anxious to see you married, only Philip appears so entirely unexceptionable, that we could not wish you to make a better choice. I see you curl your lips

a little, Katharine ; well, Philip does not shine much in society, I grant, and at your age you think much of that, but he is good, and intelligent too, and if not polished, he is one of nature's gentlemen. Take care you never meet with anything worse," she added, with a half-smile, as she kissed Katharine, who, now feeling herself dismissed, immediately left the room. It may be supposed that this interview did not raise her spirits much. She was more afraid now than ever of going to the Grange, and always on the watch for any insinuations about her suspected liking for Mr. Wentworth ; still, as the time for his return approached, her hopes brightened ; then, surely, they would all know that she had not given her heart unasked. She never contemplated the possibility of her parents' disapproval : they might, indeed, insist upon delay, but for this Katharine did not care. Once assured, *by words*, of his love, she did not look further ; nay, at present, would have shrunk from considering the future.

She now no longer concealed from herself that she loved him and ardently desired his love ; she felt, indeed, that he did love her, and day by day she dwelt more and more upon the rapturous thought of the moment when he would tell her so, and when she might dare to own her secret attachment, how it had gone on gaining strength and growing into the very depths of her being.

Mr. Wentworth had mentioned a month as the

term of his absence, and this period was already past. Katharine's heart beat fast whenever she saw Mr. Manners, whenever she had even a prospect of meeting him, anxiously hoping to hear the common-place, but to her important words, "I expect my friend in a day or two;" or "Wentworth will be here to-morrow."

Of course she never questioned him herself about Mr. Wentworth's movements, but very frequently her heart burnt almost angrily within her, that others should be so indifferent as not to make the inquiries which trembled on her lips. It is true that Hester, when she was present, generally contrived to ask, shyly, whether Mr. Manners had heard from his friend lately, but as to the rest of the family, they betrayed a lamentable want of interest on the subject.

It chanced that Katharine did not meet Mr. Manners during the interval between Mr. Wentworth's announcement of his intended arrival and the arrival itself; and also, by one of those provoking perversities which so often occur to keep people asunder who desire to be together, she was not in the house when Mr. Wentworth called; and it was only on her return from a walk, that she heard the two important pieces of news, that he had returned to Coverdale, and that he had called at Hazel Bank.

However, she also heard that she would see him the following evening. It was Henry's birthday, and

two or three of his friends were to dine with him, and Mr. Rivers, happening to come in during the visit of Mr. Manners and Mr. Wentworth, asked them to join the party, quite forgetting, or at any rate disregarding, Mrs. Thorpe's gossip about the latter and Katharine.

Any one, bearing in mind the excited state of feeling in which Katharine had been living during the last month, will be at no loss to conceive the mingled hope and dread, anticipation and impatience, into which this intelligence plunged her. She could not rest, could not settle to anything; Fanny's afternoon reading was insupportable, and her questions respecting the English queens, which at another time would have been regarded with satisfaction as evincing a laudable curiosity, were now perplexing and distracting beyond endurance. In the evening, or rather afternoon, for the days were now too short for evening walks, she went into the town on an errand for her mother. Will it be deemed derogatory to her dignity as a heroine, that at every winding of the road, every new field she entered, every street corner she turned, she looked eagerly forward, half hoping, half expecting, that her eye would rest on the well-known familiar figure, whose every movement was in her estimation so graceful? Alas! she looked in vain, the apparent chance which had thrown Katharine and Marmaduke together fifty times before in these very places, refused to be kind, and with

“hope deferred” she turned into the lane which led to her home. Here she met Agatha, sauntering along, treading with a curious cynical kind of satisfaction on the fallen leaves, which already lay heaped on the path.

She raised her eyes as Katharine approached, and turned with her towards the house, merely saying—

“It is getting late.”

“Yes, and chilly,” answered Katharine, looking at Agatha’s pale, rigid face. Even more pale and rigid it looked than usual, and an observer might have noticed a strange difference between its expression and that of Katharine’s face.

The younger sister, in spite of her little disappointment, was bounding with hope ; even her restlessness and impatience gave animation and light to her features. A *living*, eager, hopeful soul looked out from her eyes ; from those of Agatha, a blank, gloomy, death-like spirit. It was strange, thought Katharine, struck in some degree by this expression, that months should go by, and Agatha’s sorrow find no relief, nay, that a sterner, more benumbing grief should seem to rest upon her than when first she came to Hazel Bank. She tried to speak kindly on some interesting topic, for the near prospect of happiness caused her heart to overflow with more affectionate feeling than usual ; Agatha, as might be expected, gave short answers, but Katharine, without heeding this, went on talking. She happened to mention some

circumstances about her walk in the morning, when Agatha turned round rather quickly, and said—

“ Oh, yes ; you were out when Mr. Manners and Mr. Wentworth called ; ” at the same time looking at her with a more searching, inquiring gaze than she usually cared to bestow.

Katharine felt the look, but she answered unconcernedly,

“ Yes ; you saw them, I suppose.”

“ I was in the room,” returned Agatha, with the same intent look ; “ they are to dine here to-morrow, so you will see Mr. Wentworth before he goes ; but you have heard this before, of course.”

“ Before he goes ! ” repeated Katharine. “ Is he going so soon ? ”

“ He goes on Monday, and this is Friday, so you might have missed seeing him altogether.”

Involuntarily a smile, half triumphant, half amused, rose to Katharine’s lips ; how little Agatha knew, to imagine that he would go away without seeing her.

The next moment she was troubled at the idea of his speedy departure ; but after all she could not wish him to linger in idleness, and now, if the plans he had mentioned were matured, a very short time would suffice to let her know, that some thought of her had influenced him in forming them. So, still dwelling on pleasant visions, she entered the house. Agatha all this time had not withdrawn her steady

gaze; she marked the triumphant smile, and exaggerated its import; and then she watched the changing lights and shadows on Katharine's face, and noted how, in the end, the lights predominated.

Yes, Katharine was happy; happy and triumphant, never dreaming, in the full tide of her joy and pride, that she, the grave, unattractive sister, could have ever had the remotest claim to the cup of bliss which seemed just lifted to her own lips!

And yet *she* was the superior; she, the grave, unattractive one, was surely intrinsically superior to the light, frivolous girl, whose very feelings, compared with hers, must be as mere foam and froth, sparkling and pleasant, and soon to vanish away! According to the estimate Agatha formed of Katharine's character, it appeared a positive indignity to herself, that a man of talent and serious reflection—a man, whose conversation showed that he appreciated her intellect and principles—should yet pass her by unheedingly, and pour forth the riches of his heart and soul upon one who had not even the claim of superior beauty to recommend her. Merely an agreeable, *piquante* girl! with a smattering of knowledge and accomplishments, and a few winning tricks of manner, which might, indeed, gain her favour amongst the commonplace people surrounding her, but which seemed scarcely fitted to attract one so far above, so totally different!

That night, long after others were in bed and

asleep, Agatha sat by the window, looking at the brilliant hunter's moon, and thinking bitter thoughts.

Bitter and even fierce, for a hidden fire had been roused in the depths of her nature, and the cold, stoical Agatha, when out of all human observation, would give vent to passionate sobs, and sharp, impulsive gestures; her whole frame racked and torn by a strange agony.

There were two things in the world which Agatha Marchmont worshipped: her high birth and her own intellect. Neither of these availed her now; far away from the halls of her ancestors, merged, as it were, in the commonplace family to which she partly belonged, few were ready to grant her consideration on account of the former; as to her intellect, its peculiarities were seldom appreciated, and she rarely met any one who cared for her kind of cleverness. This had not hitherto much disturbed her; proudly and aloft "she could soar alone;" if others did not understand, theirs be the blame and loss, not hers. But of late, she had tasted—just tasted—the sweets of congenial intercourse, and of being comprehended by one whose graces of person and manner captivated her in spite of herself; and it was bitter and most humiliating to find that she was only cared for to a certain limited extent, that as a companion she might be tolerated, but that the heart's love was never to be hers. Sometimes, indeed, the unreasonableness of expecting this

struck her forcibly ; she compared herself with Marmaduke Wentworth, and owned that there was not between them the degree of harmony required to form a suitable attachment. He was, or at any rate seemed, younger than herself ; his nature was far lighter and more brilliant than hers ; deep and thoughtful as he might be at times, the bent of his mind was towards greater cheerfulness and more hopeful views of life than she could ever entertain. And yet he was of a character to be depressed by gloom in those with whom he lived. His cheerfulness and his energy required to be supported by sympathy, a sympathy which in her he could not have found.

According to her ideas, he was sometimes frivolous, and she wondered at herself for being fascinated by what she did not thoroughly approve ; she could see clearly that whatever excellent qualities he might possess, he was far from her ideal of what man should be, and yet, what she felt for him must be love. It was as if a species of infatuation had seized her, and with all her practice in analysing feelings, she could not account for the sudden growth of this affection.

Perhaps, had she entered more fully into the history of her previous life, the natural effects of a certain mode of education and culture, and the action of a certain set of circumstances, a light might have been thrown upon the riddle which puzzled her.

Agatha, as has been said before, had always lived in seclusion, and with grown-up people for her sole companions: the spirit of youth was in some sort quelled within her, and even her girlish dreams differed from those of other girls, and were never imparted to any cherished *confidante*. Young men were to her an almost unknown race, and when she first made the acquaintance of some of them at Fairfield, she felt no wish to improve her knowledge. Then came Mr. Wentworth: he was unlike every one else, and he was kind to her; he seemed quite to understand her; and Agatha, in spite of her pride of indifference and isolation, was longing ardently for sympathy, mourning too, for a severe loss, with, as she fancied, none to care for her. More than all, she was idle. She could not fix her mind continually on deep and abstract studies, and she had no other resources. At first, Mr. Wentworth had supplied her with a fresh subject for thought; sitting at her desk, with books and papers before her, she endeavoured to draw his character, instead of tracing historical parallels. She began to guess his opinions, to speculate upon his inner life, to strive to lift aside the veil of light gaiety which so often tantalized her, by hiding his real self from view. She never dreamt of danger in all this; she was much too philosophical, too proud, too confident in her own strength, and too contemptuous of love and love-affairs, to do so; and yet, when once the truth flashed upon her, the

earnestness of her character did not permit her to trifle with it. She called her interest in him by no false names; accounted for her unhappiness by no fictitious causes. She believed that she loved him, and she owned the fact to her own heart, whilst almost at the same moment she discovered that her love was unreturned.

Hers was not a meek, humble nature to bend submissively to her fate, to deem her own unworthiness a sufficient cause for his indifference; rather, she chafed impatiently beneath the burden of disappointment; accusing, in her heart, him of inconsistency and trifling, and Katharine of manœuvring and coquetry.

She could not stoop to use fascinations, even towards the man of her choice: she could not dress, and smile, and look *piquante* like Katharine; and she half despised him for being caught by such lures. She should scorn to accept even *his* love, if it were gained by such meretricious qualities. No; whoever loved her must love her as she was, with her stern look and her repellant manner; must be able to read her as she truly was, and to prize the strong, earnest heart, the lofty, cultivated mind, upon which alone she valued herself.

But were these emotions, now goading Agatha's spirit almost beyond endurance, the real fruits of pure, simple, unquestioning love? Could that feeling be one of deep and true affection which allowed

her to think so much of herself, and so hardly of the object of her supposed attachment?

Or was it merely a fictitious semblance, the product of morbid and idle imaginings, and sorely wounded pride? an exaggerated love of self rather than love of another?

It remains to be seen: at present let us leave Agatha, rather in pity, than in blame.

CHAPTER II.

DISAPPOINTMENT.

THE next day seemed very long to Katharine; she could not rest within doors, and she lounged away great part of her time in the garden, having seized upon the fact of its being Henry's birthday—as an excuse for giving Fanny a holiday.

It was one of those soft, mild days so frequent in October; the sky was gray but not gloomy, and the various reds and oranges, and golden and olive greens of the foliage rose against it with peculiar clearness and brilliancy. The influence of nature and atmosphere was calm and soothing; it was not a day for buoyant and joyous thoughts, but rather one on which the mind was inclined to dwell upon gentle tranquil pleasures, and to form for itself an ideal world of peace and sober happiness.

Katharine smiled softly to herself as she paced up and down the no longer shady walk under the lilac-trees. No dazzling images of worldly prosperity floated before her eyes, but a serene view of a life of deep, inner satisfaction, and heart-felt contentment:

years, perhaps, of separation and patient waiting, and then a time of duties shared, and inevitable struggles bravely breasted together ; for Katharine's visions, it is needless to say, included another's destiny in her own.

They would be poor, perhaps ; she did not know, but she never thought of him as overflowing with worldly success or wealth : poor, but what was poverty ? What was it ever to the dreams of nineteen ? She could be economical and self-denying ; she could work hard if need were ; and what a joy to shed a glory and a grace upon common things from the spirit she would throw into them ! The poetry of daily life ! how beautiful to exemplify it in her career !

Poor child ! perhaps such fancies were to be cast far away from her ; perhaps others might have scorned them had they guessed them ; perhaps some day she would herself look upon them with shame and bitterness of spirit.

But still they were serious, earnest thoughts, not mere girlish wanderings ; and such thoughts, even if never permitted to pass to actions, may not be treated as utterly worthless and contemptible.

Selfishness and vanity had small share in them ; imperfect they might be, and savouring of creature-idolatry, but germs of better, higher things were contained within them, than are always to be found in a girl's imaginings.

The morning passed away; the afternoon closed in, and Katharine left the garden at length, and gathering on her way the last sprigs of her favourite red geranium, she passed into the house and went to her room to dress for dinner. It was not vanity surely which made her linger at the glass, and carefully smooth and curve her glossy bands of hair, and arrange so becomingly those same scarlet blossoms in the delicate folds of her pale, dove-coloured *barège* dress; surely, not the severest and sternest could have blamed Katharine now, or deemed her anxiety other than pardonable weakness.

Mrs. Rivers, Katharine, and Hester were the only ladies of the party, for this was emphatically a gentlemen's dinner, and consisted merely of Henry's personal friends, Mr. Manners and Mr. Wentworth being, however, rather his father's guests than his own. Philip Thorpe had been invited, but he had contrived to be away at some inevitable market.

Agatha did not appear; she had been suffering all day from a terrible headache, the only malady to which she was subject, but which was always of too severe and intense a nature to admit a suspicion that it was made a pretext for secluding herself. On this occasion it might, perhaps, second her wish, and very possibly it had been caused by her mental agitation; but, however desirous she might have been to avoid witnessing the meeting of Katharine and Mr. Wentworth, she would have resisted as weakness the

temptation of finding an excuse for remaining in her room.

The meeting! What was there to witness? Nothing.

Katharine and Mr. Wentworth met like common acquaintances, though the heart of one of them, at any rate, was throbbing even to pain, and the five weeks of separation might have been five years, from the growth of feeling that had taken place.

How near she had been to him in thought during the last few hours! how much nearer than she seemed to be now in his actual presence, when stern realities and inevitable conventionalities raised a sort of barrier between him and her!

She had scarcely spoken to him, when dinner was announced.

After a moment's hesitation, he advanced to lead her into the dining-room. The other young men, scarcely more than boys, had no idea of interfering with him, and Mr. Manners, as a matter of course, took Mrs. Rivers.

And now Katharine ought to have been happy, and for a moment she believed that she was so; but presently a restless uneasiness came over her, a fear that she had been mistaken, and had suffered her imagination to run away with her.

Mr. Wentworth neither spoke nor looked as she had expected he would do; a mist of coldness seemed rising around him, enwrapping his words and chilling

his tones. He was grave, and there was no tenderness in his gravity. What could it mean? Katharine pondered as she tried to talk upon the indifferent subjects he introduced, and strove to prevent the disappointment at her heart—from rising to her features.

Dinner passed in constraint and uneasiness; the precious moments were rapidly vanishing, and this was the last evening, perhaps, they would be together; and he did not seem to care.

Katharine wondered if he really did intend to leave Coverdale on Monday, as Agatha had said; she made a desperate effort and asked him.

He changed colour slightly.

“Yes; I leave Coverdale on Monday, and probably for ever.”

The words fell chill on Katharine’s ear.

“I suppose you think Mr. Manners will not stay there long; I have heard that he expects to get a better living soon.”

“I was not thinking of him, I was thinking of myself; so far as I can see, it will be my duty to keep away from Coverdale and its neighbourhood.”

Katharine looked up quickly, and met his eyes; they were no longer gravely stern, but the glance she had so frequently encountered before was fixed upon her. She lowered hers instantly, reassured in some measure, yet still puzzled.

"You look incredulous," he continued, after a short pause, "and yet I know you believe in duties."

"Certainly; but I cannot see what duty can require you to leave Coverdale for ever."

"If you cannot, it is not my part to enlighten you."

"But you did not think in this way when you went away," said Katharine, irresistibly impelled to continue the subject, though feeling as if, by doing so, she compromised her dignity a little. His words implied so much, and yet, surely it was not her part to seek to draw forth more explicit ones.

"No, not exactly," he answered; "yet I always had an idea that it might be so—an idea which I should have attended to earlier. But I did not mean to talk about myself. Cannot you suggest another subject?"

"How can I, when you ask me in that way?" said Katharine, with a miserable attempt at a laugh. "Besides, I did not know you had so much objection to speak of yourself. I always thought you as egotistical as most people."

"It is rather a dangerous practice to indulge; if I may warn you by my experience, never give way to it yourself. Mrs. Rivers is looking at you, so I cannot explain further now."

Katharine was so absorbed that she would not have seen her mother's movement; now, she rose hastily and followed her and Hester out of the room. Mr.

Wentworth held the door open ; she scarcely looked at him, but she felt his gaze, which was at once tender and sad.

“ Katharine, I wish you would go up-stairs and see if Agatha would like some tea,” said Mrs. Rivers, when they were in the passage ; and Katharine instantly obeyed, glad to escape even from her mother and Hester, and not waiting for a candle. Knocking softly at Agatha’s door, and hearing a prompt “ Come in,” she entered the room.

There was no light except from the fire, which had been lighted in the afternoon, the evenings being now somewhat chilly, and near it Agatha was seated in a large arm-chair, reclining in a languid attitude, noticeable in her, as her usual bearing was upright even to stiffness, and she eschewed, as if from conscientious motives, the most pardonable forms of self-indulgence.

Her face looked even paler than usual, and was fully exposed to view, her hair being drawn back from her brow, and resting in a thick heavy knot on her neck. A large white dressing-gown wrapped round her thin, somewhat gaunt figure, added to the ghastliness of her appearance, and Katharine, as she distinctly traced her worn, marked features by the glow of the fire, could not help thinking that she was really ill, and suffering from something more than a common headache. Casting aside, for the moment, her own immediate concerns, she approached her, and

with as much kindness and sympathy as she could infuse into her manner, made her inquiries.

"I am better," said Agatha; "I have scarcely any pain now."

"But you look tired and weak," said Katharine. "I am sure you want some nourishment."

"I want nothing but rest," said Agatha. "I shall go to bed directly."

"Will you have some tea, or would you like anything else?"

"No, thank you; and don't let me detain you here; there is company down-stairs."

"We have only just left the dining-room," said Katharine; "there is no occasion for me to go down at present."

"Oh, I forgot, you are at liberty till the gentlemen leave it also," said Agatha.

"And longer if necessary," said Katharine, observing the sarcastic turn of the sentence. "I can stay all the evening, if I can be of any use to you."

"Fortunately, I do not require the sacrifice; I told you I only needed rest."

"But you look so exhausted: do have some tea, at any rate, or some arrowroot, or something; mamma will be quite distressed."

"You may send me some tea, if you like," said Agatha, wearily, and Katharine felt that the speech was intended as her dismissal. She said nothing more, but left the room to give the order.

Agatha watched her, and as the door closed, she turned her face once more towards the fire.

“He has not spoken yet,” she said to herself, and an expression, difficult to define, stole over her features; something like a grim joy was contained in it, but it quickly passed away; and with the words, “This is meanness and weakness, I scorn myself for it,” she impatiently drew towards her the table that stood near her, lighted a candle, and commenced reading. It is true her eyes were dazzled, and her temples throbbed with the least exertion, but anything was better than the indulgence of such thoughts as hers.

Katharine, meanwhile, after ordering the tea for Agatha, did not return to the drawing-room, but continued to wander about the landing and staircase. She was restless and excited, and she did not wish to see any one just then. She had an idea that her face bore traces of the state of her mind, though she did not imagine that they were so plain as to have been read by Agatha. She was not exactly unhappy; she could not be that, with the prospect of two or three hours of perhaps exclusive conversation with Marmaduke Wentworth; but still there was a sinking of the heart, a faint possibility of some dreadful disappointment weighing upon her, and chilling her buoyant hopes.

The alternations between hope and this agonizing doubt made her pulses throb and her cheeks burn;

she *could not* be tranquil ; several times she walked half way down-stairs, intending to enter the drawing-room, and then turned back again, overpowered by that strange gnawing at her heart, which it seemed as if only a burst of tears could relieve.

But no tears came ; she could not cry, she could only sit still, and try to reason herself out of her nervousness.

At length she made a desperate effort ; she heard the servant carrying coffee into the dining-room. Mr. Wentworth would not stay long now, she knew ; and much as she would have prized a few minutes of unwitnessed conversation with him, she would not risk encountering him alone in the passage. No ; she had been too easily won as it was, she would not seem intentionally to seek him. This thought chased her down the stairs, and she entered the drawing-room in haste.

“Have you been sitting with Agatha all this time ?” asked Mrs. Rivers.

“No, mamma ; not all the time ; she did not wish me to stay, but I sent her some tea. Her head is much better, she says.”

“How cold your hands are, Kitty,” said Fanny, who was lingering in the drawing-room, though it was her bed-time, and who had sidled up coaxingly to beg Katharine to ask if she might sit up a little longer, as there was company.

“Are they ?” said Katharine ; “not very, I think ;”

and she passively suffered Fanny to lead her up to the fire and hold her hands towards the flame.

“Ask mamma if I may sit up,” whispered Fanny a second time, and Katharine mechanically repeated the request.

“Because there is company?” said Mrs. Rivers; “well, really I don’t think Henry’s visitors are much company for you, Fanny; however, you may stay half an hour longer, if you like.”

“I don’t care for most of them,” said Fanny, “but I like Mr. Wentworth; we both like him, don’t we, Katharine?”

Hester, who heard the last remark, looked up and smiled, but Katharine was in no mood for Fanny’s jokes, to which she usually listened indulgently enough; she turned suddenly away from the fire, and at that moment the door opened, and some of the gentlemen, Mr. Wentworth one of the number, entered the room. He did not join Katharine immediately, but seated himself by her mother, and talked to her for some time.

Presently music was proposed, and Katharine and Hester played and sang; a little group gathered round the piano, and gradually dispersed again, and ultimately Katharine found herself sitting there with only Mr. Wentworth by her side.

The young people were playing at the racing game, and Mr. Rivers and Mr. Manners engaged in conversation; Mrs. Rivers hovering about be-

tween them and the gamesters, amongst whom Fanny was very busy.

The piano corner was retired and unobserved, two people might easily converse together without the risk of betraying their secrets, and, as Katharine gave a hasty glance round the room, her heart began to beat more wildly. Surely something would be said now. At first, however, only music and songs were spoken of; Katharine played fragments and Mr. Wentworth sang. But this could not go on for ever; insensibly the conversation glided, as it always did, to more personal topics, and once more Mr. Wentworth checked himself, saying—

“I am talking of myself again, and I half made a vow not to do it.”

Katharine felt that she ought not to ask for any explanation, but she could not resist the impulse.

“What do you mean? I cannot understand exactly why people should not talk of themselves; it is much more interesting than anything else generally.”

“That is just the danger; people become so interested that they cannot stop at the right point. One cannot be satisfied without imparting and asking what it is madness to——” again he checked himself.

“You speak in enigmas,” said Katharine.

“I ought to be glad that they *are* enigmas to you. I dare not explain them.”

“And one should be always reserved, I suppose, and never express one’s tastes, and feelings, and thoughts. How confined you would make the circle of conversation !”

“Not at all ; you mistake my meaning. I am not saying that it is dangerous to express tastes and feelings, &c. ; but it is dangerous to lay before another person your inner life, and to be always striving to penetrate that person’s inmost thoughts. Discussing together what we are, and what we may be ; comparing notes about our most cherished feelings. You *must* know what I mean, for it is to act as I have done.”

“I did not know there was any harm in it,” said Katharine, “and I am sure I have done it myself.”

“Not as I have, with your eyes open to the danger. You may have followed perhaps, and even for you it may be better to avoid such a practice in future, unless—I don’t know what I would say. Oh ! if one could forget all one’s imprudence ! Perhaps I ought to forget ; perhaps I ought to ask you to forget——”

The blood rushed in torrents to Katharine’s cheeks, and then left them, and even her lips pale. She understood him now : he recommended her no longer to think of him, clearly showing that he knew she did so ; for the moment maidenly pride overmastered every softer feeling, every desperate longing to obtain

some knowledge of his love. With the light tone a woman can always assume even when her heart is bursting, she said—

“ You may be satisfied ; my memory is not tenacious enough to remember anything you wish forgotten ; indeed, I am puzzled to understand what there is to require either remembrance or forgetfulness. It appears to me, much ado about nothing. Come, will you sing something by way of a change ? ”

The flippant manner did not deceive Mr. Wentworth ; and, however much it might have suited his prudent notions, he could not be satisfied without endeavouring to change it.

“ What can I sing to-night ? ” he asked, in a tone that put all poor Katharine’s ideas of dignity to flight. She saw, as she had done on the day when she flirted with Philip Thorpe, that he had the key to her thoughts. There was something half terrible in the consciousness that any one possessed this power so entirely, and yet there was a sweetness in it also ; it spoke of a deep secret sympathy. But if this strong sympathy existed, why must conventionalities thus step in between them ?—why, guessing each other’s inmost thoughts, must they strive to veil them so closely ?

Katharine did not know why, but she felt that Marmaduke for some reason or other condemned himself to silence ; nay, had he not almost commanded her to forget him ? And whatever the cause might

be, she must suffer in silence and in patience ; she, the woman, could ask no explanation from the man. Let him imply what he might ; let him wile away her heart by soft speeches and tender looks ; let him agonize and tantalize her by varying conduct and inconsistent speech, and yet she had no power to remonstrate : she could no more ask to know his meaning than she could fly away from his presence or perform any other simple impossibility. And yet he was acting honourably according to a man's creed, which forbade him to speak decisive words of love, when he had no present means of making her his wife ; according to a man's pride, which would not suffer him to seek her father, to confess his imprudence and his affection, to beg his generosity and his consent to a long indefinite engagement !

Such a creed may be true and just : the pity is that it is generally remembered too late, as many a woman's heart, pining in secret for the one word which should crown months of delusive happiness, can testify.

Would it be wrong, leaving the issue to time and circumstances, to speak that one satisfying word ?—or is there some virtue in keeping to the letter of the rule, when the spirit of it is broken ?

It is not necessary to answer the question here : it is enough to say that Mr. Wentworth acted as perhaps most men would have acted ; and

although possibly he longed to say that one word, as much as Katharine did to hear it, he left it unspoken.

Unspoken, *yet all but spoken.*

He and Katharine could not talk together on that last evening without hovering near the forbidden topics; the sound of light gay music was felt as a mockery by both, and the tones of deeper, truer harmony awakened beneath her fingers and by his voice aroused within them the irrepressible thirst for sympathy and communion of heart. Half phrases, helped by expressive looks and tones, kept alive in Katharine, to the very last, the hope that before parting the one decisive word would be said: oh! how she longed to keep back the hours, and delay, yet a little, the final moment!

Her whole life seemed concentrated in this one evening; her very faculties were sharpened and heightened; she felt as if, now, for the first time, she really lived; every feeling was intensified; every nerve kept at its utmost tension.

The end came at last; Mr. Manners, who had lingered as long as possible, out of regard to his friend's pleading looks, rose to depart. Mr. Wentworth left Katharine, shook hands with Mrs. Rivers and Hester, and then returned to her to say "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," that was all; no definite prospects of ever again meeting; no hint of any future time; a

hurried pressure of the hand, and scarcely a glance from the eyes.

This was the end of a dream of happiness! Could Katharine complain? Her lot was a common one; such things happen every day, and she might have known what to expect.

There was a general departure; a little confusion in the passage. Mr. Rivers and Henry were accompanying their guests to the door; Hester coaxing Fanny away to bed, and Mrs. Rivers looking into the dining-room to see that no lights were left burning. Katharine remained alone in the drawing-room; she could still hear the well-known voice in the passage; he might yet return and say something. She held her breath to listen, despising herself the while for her weakness: she heard his step approaching; he was near the door. Would he come?—would he speak? Oh! it seemed cruel to leave her thus without one word: she could have borne the parting, separation for an indefinite period, nay, for ever, had he but assured her that he loved her, that it was no shame to dwell upon his remembrance.

The step retreated; more “Good-nights” were heard, and then the door closed.

Katharine rose from the music-stool on which she had been sitting, and drew a long breath, but she showed no other emotion. She rapidly shut the piano, and replaced the music in her portfolio; she could not bear to look at it, or to linger in that

favourite corner, where so many hopes had been awakened, so many blissful visions been indulged.

Then she joined the rest of the family, exchanged the accustomed good-nights and kisses, and proceeded up-stairs. But before she had reached the first landing, she was stopped by her mother's voice.

“Katharine, just look into Agatha's room before you go to bed, and see if she is asleep; I am rather uneasy about her. If she is restless and feels ill, come and tell me.”

“Yes, mamma;” and Katharine, for the second time that evening, visited Agatha's room. She seemed to be the one always chosen to have dealings with Agatha. Mrs. Rivers would have gone herself had she given way to the first impulse of her maternal heart, but her advances had always been received by Agatha with such coldness, that she could not help shrinking half nervously from any superfluous communication with her.

Katharine lightly opened the door, thinking, indeed hoping, that Agatha might be asleep. There was no sound in the room, and looking towards the uncurtained bed, she saw her lying, in, as she thought, a tranquil slumber. She was quietly retreating, when Agatha turned round.

“What is the matter? What are you doing here, Katharine?”

“Mamma wished to know if you were asleep; I am afraid I disturbed you just now.”

“No ; I have not been asleep,” said Agatha, turning her large black eyes full on Katharine’s face ; “but I am quite well ; no one need think about me.”

“Good-night, then,” said Katharine, glad to escape the scrutiny of such penetrating eyes.

She quitted the room, but not before Agatha had drawn tolerably correct conclusions from her pale face and haggard-looking brow. Katharine’s whole appearance was indeed worn and weary ; the stimulus which had given unnatural brilliance to her eye and colour to her cheek was withdrawn, and reaction had commenced. But even now she could not indulge her emotions in solitude. Hester shared her room, and even to her she could not at first bear to own her disappointment, or allow her to perceive her deep mortification. Whilst undressing, she tried to talk in her usual manner ; and even after she was in bed, she continued to make lively remarks upon the events of the day, and would not say the customary “Good-night,” until Hester pleaded weariness, and declared that she must go to sleep.

Perhaps Hester was not really deceived by Katharine’s *bravado* air ; perhaps even Katharine in her inmost heart scarcely expected that she would be ; but at any rate it answered her purpose, and put a stop to all attempts at sympathy, which would in her present mood have caused her intense pain and humiliation.

For Katharine was just now in the proud phase

of her misery; and her memory rested with the greatest tenacity on those hard sentences in which Mr. Wentworth recommended her not to think of him, and half reproached her for the extent of her intimacy with him. She turned on her pillow to wrestle silently with these bitter thoughts, to repress every sound of indignant grief, and yet to set her lips firmly and clench her hands convulsively at the recollection of her visions of happiness, and to smile in sad self-scorn at her musings of that very morning, her dream of unselfish devotion, her sweet, glad, tearful resolutions of endurance, of submission to anything and everything for his sake. How they mocked her now; how unnecessary had been those almost holy-seeming vows which she had registered in her heart. Now, they had been torn up by the roots, and by his hand.

Oh, she had been mad to imagine such things, to build such precious hopes upon a few kind looks and words; and they were right after all, her aunt Thorpe, and her sage compeers, who told her of the slipperiness of man's attentions: he was, after all, one of those agreeable strangers of whom they spoke, "here to-day, and gone to-morrow," making half-vows to many, whole vows to none!

Madly, and more madly, these thoughts worked in Katharine's brain; and worse than anything else was the agonizing fear that she had betrayed her weakness before his eyes; he must have seen it; he must

have scorned her for her wretched futile attempts, on this very evening, to assert some claim upon his heart, her unmaidenly lingering upon the topics he had told her were best undiscussed, her endeavours to obtain an explanation, her pitiful, coquettish devices to make him speak out.

Even in the dark midnight hour, Katharine covered her burning face with her hands at the thought of her deep degradation; she had been forward, had sought to be sued, had met advances half way, and, after all, to be spurned at last!

What sort of sleep could attend a pillow haunted by ideas like these? What but fitful, broken slumbers, and incoherent, strangely mingled dreams? And yet Katharine did sleep at last, thoroughly exhausted with the violence of her feelings. Sheer weariness merged in sleep, not the refreshing sleep, indeed, to reinvigorate the mind with new energy, but enough to prepare the body for the fatigues of another day.

CHAPTER III.

TWO WAYS OF BEING SORROWFUL.

THE next day was Sunday. None of the ordinary business of life interfered between Katharine and her meditations, and it must be confessed that in the quiet old church, when passively listening to the beautiful morning service, her own peculiar sorrows usurped the place of holier, serener thoughts. Still the day and the spot were not without influence over her ; she had gone into the church with embittered feelings and morbid self-consciousness, ready to fancy that every one present knew her disappointment, and that she was degraded in the eyes of those over whom she had in her girlish vanity triumphed.

She returned in a different mood, sorrowing still, but in a quieter, humbler spirit, less self-scorning, but more self-blaming. Of course, notwithstanding all her gloomy depressing thoughts, Katharine managed to preserve an equable and tolerably cheerful demeanour—every woman can do so, it seems an instinct of her nature—and no one, not even of those who best loved her, would have guessed that she was

undergoing a severe trial; that this day was, as it were, a crisis in her life whose effects would be felt through all her future.

But she was not required to spend the whole day before the eyes of the family circle; Sunday afternoon was always a quiet time, and she could be as solitary as she chose. The only claim upon her, was the occasional duty of hearing Willie and Fanny repeat the Catechism and Collect, but generally speaking, Mrs. Rivers preferred doing this herself, and so it was on this afternoon. Katharine waited till her mother had summoned the two children to her own room, and then she escaped to the favourite little dressing-room, a place where she was not likely to be disturbed. Agatha, as usual, had retired to her own apartment; Hester did not appear disposed to leave the comfortable drawing-room fire, and no one else was in the habit of visiting Katharine's retreat.

The lilacs and laburnums no longer waved their perfumed branches against the window, and no brilliant summer sun cast flickering lights and shadows on the wall; the chilly breath of coming winter was upon everything, and the garden lay bare and melancholy to view.

As is frequently the case in autumn, a sudden change had taken place in one day; yesterday a warm, rich tinge coloured the prospect, and departing summer was gorgeous in its decay; to-day the

cold wintry light rested only on sombre tints of brown and gray, and a misty gloom enshrouded the lingering remnants of the bright and the beautiful.

Nature appeared in harmony with Katharine, and did not mock her with gay sunshine and rich bloom.

She sat down in the old chair by the window, and, resting her arms on the little table, supported her head on her hands. It was not long before the tears came; hitherto she had not shed any, or only a few stray passionate ones, angrily dashed away; but now she cried bitterly and sadly. The proud mood had passed away; it was not in her nature to retain it long. As had happened before on slighter occasions, the wretched, injured feeling was replaced by a gentler one. She recalled now, not merely the obnoxious speeches which had caused her mortification, but all the others which had accompanied and preceded them; she recalled Marmaduke Wentworth as he stood altogether in her estimation, and she refused to believe that he had fallen short of the ideal she had formed of him. The more she thought, the less could she cease to trust him, the less possible did she find it to consider him as belonging to the denounced class of "flattering, flirting strangers." And yet, unless he really loved her, in that light he ought to be considered. If he were the being she had imagined him, he most assuredly would never have spoken as he had done, unless he truly cared for her; viewing his conduct even in the coolest common-sense

manner, he had unmistakeably given her reason to suppose so. Being, then, what he was, what she *must believe* him to be, or cast entirely aside her faith in human nature, he could not have wished to deceive her, and his equivocal behaviour must be laid to the account of circumstances, not to any fault of his.

Katharine's heart once more thrilled within her, as this view of the case assumed form and consistency; she could bear to rest in ignorance of the circumstances which trammelled him, so long as she could still trust in his truth and goodness; she could blame herself for unreasonableness and impatience, so long as she could still give him credit for being all that was noble and excellent. Doubtless she had been foolish and hasty, but he was wise and prudent: he loved her, but some unknown cause prohibited him from telling her of his love; some day that cause might be removed, and he would come and explain everything; and if not, if she never saw him again, she could still rest satisfied in knowing that her heart had not been bestowed unworthily, that she had not been deceived.

“The course of true love never did run smooth;” why should she expect it to do so in her case? She had enjoyed weeks of happiness, transient glimpses of a bliss that to many was denied altogether; now trouble had come, and she must meekly bend to inevitable discipline—discipline and trial; Katharine owned now in heartfelt humility that she needed

them; had she not sinned in her prosperity, and made an idol of the creature, forgetful of the Creator? had not her whole mind and soul been wrapped up in this world's happiness? had not her whole being been concentrated in one absorbing feeling, to the neglect of all other claims and duties? Truly, for these things she needed chastisement; for these, and for all her sins of vanity and heedlessness, she should bow her head in shame, rather than for the imagined degradation that had humiliated her last night.

Katharine now no longer sought to rebel against the burden imposed upon her, nor did she weakly strive to consider it less than it was. She frankly owned to herself that a sorrow had come upon her, the greatest she had known, for her life had been free from care, and death had never visited the favoured household; but she also recognized the great truth that every trial may be borne, and borne at once meekly and bravely.

The sorrow, too, seemed robbed of half its bitterness, when she could still trust him whom she had so blindly loved; she might still love him, praying only for strength that her love might be without idolatry; he might still keep a place in her heart, only not the first place; his image might still mingle with her thoughts, but not to the exclusion of higher thoughts, or to the neglect of her duties. Katharine fortified herself with good resolutions, till she no longer wept; the passion of grief died away, and

only a sadness, deep and tender, now remained ; she thought of him and his visible depression, and wondered how she could ever have blamed him and forgotten his unhappiness in her own wounded dignity. She tried to imagine his future position, but fancy failed her ; she knew so little of the actual world, and a man's prospects in it. Evidently, he had been unable to carry out the plans he had formed before leaving Coverdale, and to those which he had substituted for them she had no clue. But she could not fear for him ; difficulties and struggles might await him, but he was not one to faint by the way.

Only, if he had told her ; if he had but allowed her to own her love ; surely, surely both of them would have felt comforted and supported under whatever trials they might have to bear. But she was again returning to the region of murmurs ; she must submit, and rest satisfied that all was guided for the best.

Katharine's trust was large both in God and man ; if for a time she was disheartened, comfort soon reached her.

The night which followed these meditations she slept soundly ; but very early in the morning she awoke. It was impossible to sleep again, and she listened rather impatiently to the Fairfield church-clock as it struck the hours and quarters, the sound reaching her ears clear and distinct in the stillness

which rested over the household. It was Monday morning; that was her first thought; the day on which he was to depart. As she watched the slow, cold dawn of the "gray day," she pictured him to herself amongst his travelling preparations. He was to leave the Fairfield station by the earliest train—even now he must be on the road to it. The way led past Hazel Bank, one more glimpse she might yet gain of him. Full of this new idea, Katharine stole noiselessly from her bed without disturbing the sleeping Hester, and wrapping herself in her dressing-gown, she took her station by the window, and keeping well behind the shelter of the curtain, and, holding aside a tiny portion of the blind, she gazed intently along the road in the direction of Coverdale.

Scarcely anything could be seen by the faint light, and an October mist hung over the distance. Still the white line of road could be traced for some way, and no thick green foliage now obscured it. The sound of wheels once or twice quickened Katharine's attention, and sharpened her sight, but only carts on their way to market met her eyes; she began to think that she had been mistaken in the hour, or that some cross-road led from Coverdale to the station, when again the noise of a vehicle struck her ear.

A brisker sound this time; no lumbering waggon, or grating, rumbling butter-cart now. Yes; it was

Mr. Manners' dog-cart; two gentlemen in the front seat, the luggage piled up at the back. Alas, for romance! a drizzling rain was falling, and Mr. Wentworth was holding a large umbrella over himself and his friend. Much edified by the view of the umbrella, Katharine was shrinking back, feeling as if, in spite of blind and curtain, it would be known that she was looking. But at this moment the umbrella was lifted a little on one side; she saw him look up at the house, even, as she fancied, at her particular window. It was a satisfaction to feel that he thought of her, that he was in imagination taking leave of her, as she of him. And yet Katharine would not have liked him to know that she saw him.

Securely hidden from view, she waited at the window till the last glimpse of that most unpoetical conveyance—the dog-cart—had vanished, and then noiselessly returned to her bed, and, burying her head in the pillow, gave vent to the aching of her heart in quiet, not bitter and passionate, tears.

And Agatha, was not she also awake at this hour, grieving at the departure of one who wasted no thought upon her?

Truly, Mr. Wentworth, if he were a flatterer and a coxcomb, might have been gratified to leave two sad hearts in one happy household. But, even if he had suspected the case, it is probable he would not have been much elated. He was far-sighted enough and discriminating enough to have guessed that not

his merits, but the unsettled state of her own mind, caused Agatha's sudden and improbable - seeming liking for him. Love had come to her heart when it was idle and unoccupied, when she was longing for sympathy and kindness, yet shrinking from all manifestations of them that were freely offered to her.

Agatha did not rise, like Katharine, to gain a last glimpse of the man who occupied her thoughts ; she would have scorned herself for doing so ; nay, she did not even remember that it was the hour of his departure ; for her, he had departed long ago, and her imagination never descended to details about him.

She lay awake grieving, not so much that he was going away, but that he had ever come to trouble the course of her life, and to wound her in her self-esteem.

How little we know of the inner life of those amongst whom we live ! The observation is a trite one, and yet we seldom fully realize it. Agatha and Katharine met at the breakfast-table that morning, and neither of them guessed in the remotest degree the thoughts of the other. Agatha had indeed an idea that Katharine was a little disappointed and sorry, but she did not give her credit for possessing enough strength of feeling to care for anything very acutely ; and as for Katharine, nothing would have surprised her more than a view of the actual

state of Agatha's heart. Those around them were equally blind, with the exception of Hester, who knew Katharine too well not to be aware that she must be suffering; and Mrs. Rivers, too, had perhaps a dim perception that Mr. Wentworth's departure was not altogether considered by her with indifference.

Agatha, as usual, was grave and taciturn; Katharine, as usual, serene and cheerful; there was no perceptible change in either of them.

After breakfast, Agatha withdrew to her own room; it was, as has been said before, one of the best in the house, and sufficiently large to have one end of it exclusively appropriated as a study.

Here stood her writing-table, supporting a ponderous desk, and a number of alarming-looking volumes. One side of the window-recess was occupied by book-shelves; on the other stood a small table with work materials, and having under it a large basket filled to overflowing with calico, print, and flannel, and sundry unfinished garments; for, truth to say, Agatha's "charity work" did not proceed at a very flourishing rate. She never felt that the cottages about Fairfield belonged to her, and duty, unmingled with any love or interest, prompted her labours. About the whole room there was nothing graceful, scarcely feminine; it was much better furnished than the rooms appropriated to the other girls, and yet it looked bare. Katharine or

Hester could not have occupied it a day, without leaving traces of woman's handiwork and woman's taste, yet it would have been difficult to say where the difference lay.

Grim tidiness was the only characteristic of such a room; not a flower, not a picture, not a knick-knack did it contain! A handsome dressing-case stood on the toilet table, but it was carefully closed, and none of its treasures exposed to view: no fanciful little boxes, no cut-glass scent-bottles, no bright-topped pomade-cases, seemed destined to minister to Agatha's severe toilet. Certainly no womanly vanities were at hand to distract her attention if she wished to study, yet it could not be said that Agatha's pursuits always were conducted in a satisfactory manner.

On this particular morning she seated herself at her writing-table and opened her desk, but a considerable time passed before she granted any attention to the formidable volumes by her side.

At last, however, she read, plunging into the depths of metaphysics. But this, her favourite study, far from calming and bracing her mind, only raised in it unwonted trains of speculation. She, who had a dread of all wild, unsettled opinions, who had been accustomed to pin her faith solely on those who dogmatically settled every doubtful point, found herself bewildered by a tormenting scepticism.

What was anything the world contained?—what was she?—what was the use of anything or any-

body?—was there such a thing as happiness?—would perplexity ever be solved, and the course of destiny be made plain?

These, and the like bewildering thoughts, too mingled and confused for the pen to follow, haunted Agatha's brain.

Drawing them within a narrow compass, and considering simply herself: what was the purpose of her life?—what happiness had she ever known, what prospect had she of knowing any?—of what use was she to any human being?—why did she study, and seek knowledge?—what did all her knowledge bring?—only more certainty of hopeless ignorance;—a fearful tumult was awakened in her mind—how, she scarcely knew; scarcely knew what effort to make to still it. But gradually it seemed to lessen; familiar thoughts of religion started into life again, to counteract the influence of those deadly, desperate doubts.

But though Agatha could steadily reason against them, though she was what is commonly called religious, she could not feel either calmness or resignation. In point of fact her religion was rather of the head than the heart. Scrupulous in all the forms of devotion, full of reverence for the church, rigid in all self-denial, except as regarded her thoughts, Agatha had a secret internal feeling that she was further advanced in the path of holiness than those immediately around her.

And yet with all her seriousness of mind, her contempt for worldly pleasures, nay, with all her real, earnest wish to do right, there were one or two cherished faults—say rather *one*, for all sprang from the same source—which never appeared at the bar of self-examination, or, if they did, were hastily dismissed, and from which she scarcely wished to be free.

It was the indulgence of pride and its attendant errors which warped the whole tendency of her mind, and which made her now, when sorrow had befallen her, rebellious and speculative, instead of resigned and trusting; which made her, even when recalled to better thoughts, gloomy and discontented. What had she done to be so punished? was the cry of her heart. Why were others to be preferred to her—others who had fewer natural gifts?

The only point in her conduct which awakened her self-blame, was the weakness of which she had been guilty in indulging a liking for one who was unworthy of her; one who had not discernment sufficient to appreciate her talents.

She could almost hate him now, and yet she clung pertinaciously to the remembrance of him as she had imagined him, and she could not tear out of her heart the racking curiosity to know what he really thought, and really intended. If, as she fully believed, he did not love her, did he love Katharine? And if he loved Katharine, why had he left her in

uncertainty? For Agatha knew as well as if she had been told, that no declaration of love had passed Marmaduke Wentworth's lips: she believed that Katharine's self-love was mortified by this silence, and that her fleeting fancy had received a painful shock; but on feelings of such transient description she could not waste her pity. Katharine would soon find another lover, and be consoled. To such ignorance of the characters of those with whom we live, may we be brought by resolutely closing our hearts against their advances, and by making no effort to sympathise with dispositions which, at first sight, appear entirely opposite to our own.

Katharine, meantime, was so far more fortunate than Agatha, in that she had duties and occupations found for her, and was not left completely to her own devices. It must be owned, however, that on this dim, autumnal morning, her customary occupations did not present a very inviting aspect.

The schoolroom fire would not burn, and the room was half filled with smoke, and black specks settled on books, papers, and work. Opening the window, and admitting the cold, raw air, did not much improve matters. It is wrong to suppose that sorrow deadens our sense of minor miseries; on the contrary, it causes them to be more acutely felt; we may not particularize them to ourselves, but they certainly combine to swell the amount of

suffering and depression to a very appreciable extent.

To add to Katharine's discomfort, a gusty, impatient-sounding wind was blowing, and at all times she had an aversion to a wind. Not out of doors : on a sunshiny day there was something invigorating in having to do battle with a powerful breeze, but in the house, the alternate roaring, and sighing, and sinking away had a most irritating effect on her : it made her restless without any motive, sad without any cause. Of course, in general such a feeling was laughed away or scolded out of her, but now, when she had not the heart to laugh at anything, she could not altogether subdue her fretful impatience.

Still she gradually roused herself to fight against her small annoyances ; there was no safety or peace for her, she was well aware, in idleness or listlessness ; and, after crouching for a few moments by the unsatisfactory fire, indulging in repining thoughts, she summoned Fanny to her lessons, and rang the bell for Hannah to assist in coaxing the smoke up the chimney, and the warmth out of the coals.

By degrees the room looked brighter and more cheery, the smoke disappeared, and the window could again be closed. Katharine sat down by her desk, tried not to hear the wind, and turned her attention to Fanny's copy-book and sums.

But this seemed to be an unfortunate day with Fanny as well as herself ; blunders and blots were

more frequent than usual, and it really was difficult to reprove effectively without giving way to irritability.

There were trials afterwards with French verbs. Katharine found her little sister quite ignorant of some simple rules, which she thought had been thoroughly impressed upon her mind.

“I cannot think how it is, Fanny,” she said; “you must have known these rules last week, or you could not have repeated your tenses to me, and I know you had not learnt them by heart.”

“Indeed, Katharine, I said them just as I have done to-day, and you never said I was wrong.”

Katharine considered a moment: she remembered hearing Fanny repeat some French verbs last week, but no details remained in her memory; indeed, a curious veil of oblivion rested upon everything but her own feelings, and she thought it probable that Fanny was right. Her conscience smote her for negligence, and she was too candid to gloss over her fault.

“I suppose I was careless in hearing you,” she said, “as I cannot remember much about how you said them, but, at any rate, we can both be attentive now. You must let me find to-morrow that you remember what I tell you to-day.”

The rest of the morning passed more satisfactorily. Fanny saw that she had to do with a more watchful instructress, and that the careless habits of the last

few weeks could no longer be indulged. Once she attempted a sort of remonstrance.

“You are much stricter than usual to-day, Katharine.”

Katharine half blushed.

“Summer is over now, you know, Fanny; and in summer we had so many holidays and interruptions that we became careless and unsettled, I am afraid; but now, we must forget them all and go on steadily till Christmas.”

“And have no half-holidays?” pleaded Fanny; “and mamma says she likes me to have long walks when it is fine, and there is no time to walk after tea now. And you promised, Katharine, that we would go some day to Hannah’s mother’s; and you said you would take her your old black silk mantle, for she said she could make it into a bonnet. And it is such a long time since you promised, and Hannah told me the other day that she thought you had forgotten it, and her mother was very badly off for a bonnet, but she did not like to get another, because she had the promise of your mantle.”

Another reproachful tug at Katharine’s conscience. She only said—

“Well, I will get the mantle ready, and we will take it the first fine day.”

The first fine day was nearer than Katharine had imagined. About noon the clouds cleared away, and Fanny, who had been working harder than

usual, begged for a walk in the afternoon. Katharine consented, unpicked the trimming of the old mantle, made the silk into a parcel, and set out with her little sister for the Underwood.

Thoughts of the last time she had walked through these fields would intrude, but she strove vigorously against them, and, as a means of distracting her attention, she volunteered to tell Fanny a story. It was hard work at first, but the sincere endeavour to subdue fruitless regrets, brought strength with it.

Katharine was sad, but she was gaining a new power of endurance. A faint glimmer of her possible future destiny shone across her mental vision; perhaps it was to be her lot to find happiness in ministering to that of others; that might be the only kind of joy that was to fall to her share. At nineteen such an anticipation may be a little mournful, but it brought a sense of rest and peace to Katharine's mind, to which she had, for some time, been a stranger.

There were other neglected duties which she fulfilled, or at any rate commenced, before the day was over. Neglects trifling in themselves, but which spoke much of the state of her mind. Letters, which had been long left unanswered, because she felt too unsettled to write, now stared her in the face; and the few minutes which remained before tea, after returning from her walk, were occupied in beginning one to Grace Oakenshaw.

She did not like to leave a single instant unemployed, conscious that she would sink into depression if she gave herself up to her own thoughts. There was one trial which she made up her mind to undergo this very evening; it may seem a fanciful thing to call it a trial, but to Katharine it was no imaginary one. So many associations of the last few months were connected with music, and with the corner of the drawing-room where the piano stood, that she felt it would require a painful effort to open the instrument, and play upon it as usual.

How many conversations had been carried on whilst her fingers wandered idly over the keys—how many sweet hopes been indulged—which must now be abandoned! above all, how much shame and sorrow clung to the remembrance of the hours she had passed in that spot on Saturday night—shame at having hoped and expected, and watched and waited for words that had not been said—sorrow that the last few moments of what might have formed a pleasant memory for future days, had been clouded by doubts, and fears, and half-angry feelings!

Katharine opened the piano and played from memory in the twilight, purposely recalling half-forgotten pieces, that her attention might be fully engaged; she was so determined to conquer any weakness that might make her shrink from her cherished pursuits. Loud and clear the notes rang out, beneath the energy of her touch; no wailing

melancholy strain could she trust herself to play, but martial music, heart-invigorating melodies, formed her choice to-night. But this could not last very long; wearily, at length, her fingers sank on the keys, and she resolved to rise, and close the piano; but even as she did so, the old associations, against which she had so strenuously guarded, rushed across her; some slight, whispered, treasured words again sounded in her ears, and Katharine bent her head upon the music-stand, and shed a few quiet tears.

Before she could raise her head, she felt a light touch upon her shoulder, and a soft, round arm was soon clasping her neck.

“Katharine, my own darling sister,” said Hester, in a loving whisper, “don’t cry in this way. There are plenty to love you, my dearest; you are the favourite with us all. Let me speak, Katharine; I *must* speak now, when I see you suffer; I must tell you, Katharine, I understand it all. Don’t shut yourself up to me; it will do you good to know that some one feels with you, and cares for the way you have been treated.”

“Stop,” said Katharine, starting into an upright attitude, and withdrawing from Hester’s clasp. “I cannot hear you say such things, Hester; you don’t know what you are speaking of. If I am unhappy, it is my own fault; no one else is to blame; understand me, Hester, *no one*. Circumstances may be strange, and there may be some things which you

and I do not understand, but one thing I know, and you must believe it, on my word, that no one has behaved unkindly or unjustly, or in any way as you imagine, to me."

"I will try to believe what you wish, Katharine," said Hester; "but you cannot suppose I have been blind all this time, and I cannot bear the idea that any one should have made you unhappy."

"I am not going to be unhappy," said Katharine, shaking the last tears from her eyelashes; "you shall not often see me as you have done to-night."

"Then you will be reserved, Katharine, and that will be worse; I shall never dare to try to comfort you, if you put on your cold manner again; surely, surely, there is no reason why you and I should become like strangers to each other."

"No reason in the world. I have no wish to conceal anything from you, Hester; only you must believe what I have told you, and not be suspicious or hard judging, for, if you are, it will make me shrink from saying anything to you. It is foolish to pretend that I am not unhappy, but I mean to strive to be contented, and we must not talk too much of things that are gone. And I am not so unhappy as you fancy; I have had some dark wild moments, but they are over now. I have lost the dreadful suspicious fears which were worse than anything else. I find I can still feel perfect confidence, and where that is not lost, there can be no extreme sorrow."

“No, certainly not,” returned Hester, “yet I would almost rather see you utterly miserable for the present, Katharine, than think you were indulging false hopes.

“I am hoping nothing,” said Katharine; “I am only sure that in all that has passed no blame attaches to any one, except perhaps my vain, silly self. Now promise me that you will believe this, Hester, that you will never hint at—at what you did to-night, and I will promise to confide all my sorrows to you when the unhappy moods come on. Promise me,” and Katharine looked earnestly through the darkening twilight into her sister’s eyes.

“I promise never to say anything to contradict your belief, Katharine,” said Hester, “and I will *try* to think as you wish. You must be satisfied with that at present.”

“I will,” answered Katharine. “I could not bear that anything should check our confidence, my darling sister! What is there in the world like a sister, after all?”

CHAPTER IV.

A PIECE OF NEWS.—IRON AT GREYMORE.

THE gray autumn days and the short dreary ones of early winter passed away, bringing little change to the inmates of Hazel Bank. Katharine struggled boldly and bravely against the depressions which seemed in gloomy weather so much more difficult to subdue; she tried to interest herself in her duties, to give up the idea of any other happiness than might be found in witnessing the happiness of those around her, and in the enjoyment of the home affections which it would have been ingratitude to consider with indifference; and so long as she was left to the quiet and even course of her daily occupations, she succeeded in maintaining a tolerably calm and equable state of mind.

But she could not always avoid listening to the gossip of Fairfield, and events there were not so numerous, or topics of conversation so plentiful, as to make it possible that Mr. Wentworth's name should never be mentioned. On the contrary, his rather sudden departure, and the silence which Mr. Manners pre-

served about his proceedings, had invested him with a certain character of mystery, and in the absence of any more exciting subject a hundred conjectures were hazarded about him : whether he was going into partnership with his rich uncle ; whether he was engaged to his young cousin ; whether, on the other hand, he intended to take orders ; whether he might not possibly succeed Mr. Manners at Coverdale, and so return once more to the neighbourhood.

On one point, however, curiosity was soon satisfied. Mr. Wentworth and his uncle were not upon friendly terms ; so all notion of the partnership was at an end. The cause of the quarrel no one knew ; but it was certain that a quarrel had taken place.

Grace Oakenshaw mentioned in one of her letters to Katharine, that Mr. Wentworth no longer visited at his uncle's house, and the same news reached Fairfield through other channels ; every scrap of information about the concerns of the great Mr. Burton being eagerly hunted out in his native county.

Mr. Manners, when spoken to on the subject, acknowledged that he had for some time known that there had been a quarrel, but not a word did he say about the cause of it. When asked what had become of his friend, he always answered that he was in London, with which vague communication Fairfield had to rest contented. Amongst the most industrious in forming conjectures about Mr. Wentworth

was Mrs. James Thorpe; and it was no small part of the discipline of Katharine's daily life to listen to her random suggestions, and to reply with composure and good-humour to the covert sneers which were sometimes addressed to herself on the score of her vanished lover.

Sophia Thorpe was innately fond of gossip, and she also felt a little indignation towards Katharine for having monopolized the notice of the most agreeable man who had appeared in Fairfield for many a day. Although she had not regarded him, on account of his very uncertain prospects, as a desirable *parti* for either of her sisters, she would have been well pleased to have had him dangling in their train, and also to have herself received from him the meed of compliment and deference which she always considered her due, and which he had been somewhat slow to offer. To tease Katharine, therefore, by repeating the reports of others, or by her own imaginary conjectures, was a double gratification; and poor Katharine, notwithstanding the strong love and confidence at her own heart, could not help feeling annoyed, and at times humiliated.

Many an agitated walk across the fields had Katharine, when returning from a visit to her youthful aunt; many a time, her little feet almost stamping along the path, she tried to walk down the anger and irritation of her spirit; and with flushed cheeks, and hot tears quivering in her eyes, she strove to subdue

the choking at her throat and to still the trembling of her lips.

Sophia did not always adopt the same mode of attack. Sometimes she would wonder that he did not now return to Coverdale when his prospects with his uncle were destroyed; why did he not prepare himself for ordination?—after all, very likely Mr. Manners might have interest to get him a living, and the life of a country clergyman was not so bad. Of course people could not have much gaiety and amusement, and must be contented without luxuries, but with domestic affection they were not required; and then she would turn with a meaning look to Katharine, and ask her if she thought she could be satisfied with the life of a country curate's wife?

At other times she would expatiate upon the deceitfulness of mankind in general; upon the necessity for girls to be on their guard and not to believe that the flatteries they received meant anything; upon the treachery of handsome, agreeable men in particular; and upon the habit of young men, who were professedly reading for college, to fancy themselves in love, as a matter of amusement. It was a shame she would say; and though of course a married woman could see into such things, it was not wonderful that young girls, poor things! who were pleased at finding themselves noticed, should be deceived.

Then again she would burst upon Katharine with some remarkable piece of news having no direct bear-

ing upon the subject, but from which she had drawn the conclusion that Mr. Wentworth had been discovered making love to his cousin, and thus had given offence to his uncle, who was anticipating a higher alliance for his daughter. Sophia's virtuous indignation on this topic would be intense; she had no patience with such a mercenary young man, making love to a mere child like his cousin, when he certainly could not care about her; at least if he did, his conduct had been most incomprehensible, for did not all Fairfield consider that he had placed his affections on some one else? Had he not shown most unequivocally? &c. &c.

What was it possible to answer to speeches of this kind?

Had Sophia spoken out plainly, and told Katharine that she was deceived and injured, that she had been vain and foolish, she could have given a straightforward answer, and perhaps have released herself from further annoyance; but with hints and allusions, it was her only plan to seem unconscious, and to answer in general terms, as if taking an abstract view of the delinquencies of mankind, and the duplicity of Mr. Wentworth.

It was easy to see that Sophia's remarks were inconsistent, and founded on pure conjecture; but it was not easy to quell the restless beating of her heart, the longing to declare that these accusations were entirely unjust, and it was not easy to repress a sen-

sation of wounded pride, on finding herself considered in the light of a love-stricken, forsaken damsel.

Petty and ridiculous as were many of her annoyances, she yet felt that they were like the constant dropping of water upon stone, and she had need of all her resolutions of submission and humility, and of all her confidence in the intrinsic worth of the man to whom she had given her heart, to enable her to bear up against them. And would this state of things always continue, or would the lapse of time bring indifference? She never thought of the latter alternative; to the young it is sweeter to look forward to years of suffering than to the death of feeling; more tolerable to cling to a sad memory for a lifetime, than to imagine the possibility of ever acknowledging the unreality and perishable nature of early griefs.

One afternoon, a few days before Christmas, Katharine was sitting alone by the schoolroom fire, reading, or rather dreaming over, Longfellow's "Evangeline." She had left the family circle lingering in the dining-room, laughing and joking about some school experiences of the boys; and having contributed, as she thought, a fair share to the general merriment, she had retired to seek the luxury of a little quiet.

Before long, the door was softly opened, and Katharine turned round at the sound of her mother's voice.

“Katharine, I want you to go to Fairfield this afternoon: there are some things which must be ordered, and all the servants are busy. Come, child, put down that book; a walk will do you more good than moping over poetry.”

Katharine put down the book.

“Where am I to go, mamma?”

“I have written a list of the things, and you know the places to get them. And Hester tells me you have no wax tapers ready; you ought to have thought of them sooner.”

“Wax tapers!” repeated Katharine, rather dreamily.

“Yes; for the Christmas-tree: it is not like you to be so indifferent, Katharine; and now you have delayed so long, that there will not be time for Ward to order the proper colours, in case he has not those you require; however, you must do as well as you can. And now, make haste, you are looking quite pale with moping and dawdling in the house. You may as well call and see cousin Bessy; and just ask Sophia if she would like any oysters. I know some were sent to James, but we have had so many barrels sent to us, that I don’t know what to do with them. Mind you do not forget anything; I declare you are leaving the list, child; you really are growing quite absent; you must not encourage yourself in it.”

Katharine took the list, and went up-stairs to put

on her bonnet. She knew her mother did not mean to be unjust, and yet she had been so. Katharine was not in the habit of either moping or dawdling, and generally, Mrs. Rivers would have been the last person in the world to accuse her of such failings, but she had occasionally fancied lately that Katharine looked unhappy, and an officious morning visitor had been remarking that day, how very pale and thin Miss Rivers was becoming; and altogether she was rather annoyed at the idea that her daughter might be pining at the absence of one who, apparently, did not care about her. Her annoyance made her speak in a tone of irritation very unusual for her to adopt towards her children, and though the words were barely reproachful, yet Katharine felt that her mother was vexed. She had a shrewd suspicion, too, of the cause; she had lately frequently seen her mother's eye resting inquiringly upon her, and she could not bear to think that she also considered her the victim of an unrequited attachment. It was bad enough to endure the teasing insinuations of common acquaintances, though she could parry them by repartee and assumed merriment; but to know that in her home circle she was suspected of nourishing a foolish fancy for a man who had to all common observation forgotten her, was much worse and far more humiliating. It was impossible in the intercourse of family life to be always acting a part, and it was difficult to appear uniformly cheerful, when

she imagined that her spirits were noticed and commented on.

Certainly no one who had seen her, as she pursued her frosty walk on this wintry afternoon, would have accused her of *dawdling*. She went on briskly, making resolutions to be active and cheerful, and endeavouring to recollect any forgotten duties which might have given cause for her mother's censure, and, as is usual when such an inquiry is honestly made, she found enough to make all rebellious risings against injustice end in reproaches against herself.

She accomplished her business in the town satisfactorily, even so far as the wax tapers were concerned, and then leaving the region of shops displaying their stores of Christmas dainties, she turned into the quiet street where Mr. James Thorpe's house stood.

Mrs. James was at the window, looking out listlessly into the gray afternoon light, and wondering whether any one would come in to enliven her dullness, and as soon as she saw Katharine approaching she ran to the door to meet her.

Long before Katharine had finished repeating her mother's message about the oysters, she was interrupted by Sophia, who was bursting with impatience to communicate a piece of news.

“What do you think, Katharine? James has just come home from the assizes, and what do you think he heard as he was leaving the S—— station?”

“I am sure I cannot guess,” said Katharine; “was it anything that interests you very much?”

“Not exactly personally,” returned Sophia; “but we have all heard so much about the person who is concerned: besides, we know some one who is connected with him; you know *him* very well, Katharine.”

Katharine coloured slightly.

“You may as well tell me at once, Sophia; I am always stupid at guessing.”

“Well, then, Mr. Burton has failed. There is a great crash, it appears, amongst the railways, and he is found out to have behaved in a very dishonourable manner. There are thousands and thousands of pounds that he ought to make good, and all his property is to be sold in consequence. He has got out of the way himself: they say the country is too hot for him. So here is a fine end of all his greatness.”

“It is a sad thing,” said Katharine, gravely; “I did not think he was the sort of man to be really dishonest, though he might be grasping. But how is it? What has he done? I cannot exactly understand.”

“Goodness knows,” answered Sophia; “I’m sure I cannot understand either, though James began to explain it to me. It seems that Mr. Burton had a great deal in his power, and he deceived people about scrip and shares, and all that sort of thing. All I know is, that he has behaved dishonourably, and

is utterly ruined; of course, many others who are innocent are ruined with him."

Katharine made no reply. This piece of intelligence had greatly struck her; long ago, she had respected Mr. Burton as a man of energy and perseverance, who had carved out a career for himself. She had been pleased to imagine him a representative of the age; an embodiment of the spirit of that intelligent middle-class from which all improvement and progress were to spring. She had defended him when others called him a pretentious upstart, and had made him a sort of hero in her girlish imagination. Increasing knowledge had, it is true, modified her views, but some effect of her early ideas still remained in her mind; and though she had felt compelled to condemn the greedy spirit of gain and the fawning deference to rank of the great railway speculator, her interest in him had been of late quickened by the consciousness that he was Marmaduke Wentworth's uncle.

Many half-formed ideas now crowded upon her; the mysterious quarrel between the uncle and nephew; the evident change in the views of the latter with regard to his prospects; his silence concerning them; but she had not time to consider them closely, and at present she cast them aside to attend to Sophia's talk.

"What a fall from all their grandeur!" pursued Mrs. James, in a tone of some exultation; in which,

however, she evidently strove to infuse something like pity; "the place they were so proud of to be sold! all the expensive furniture put up to auction! What a pity Annersley is so far off! I would give anything to see it all. Mind you ask Grace Oakenshaw, Katharine, to give you a full account of it! I dare say she will be writing to you about it soon, for, of course, the people in the neighbourhood talk of nothing else at present."

"I will tell you if I hear any particulars," said Katharine, "but I dare say the newspapers will give quite sufficient information."

"Oh! of course they will, about the business," said Sophia; "but I want to hear about the family; how they bear it, and whether any of their grand friends help them. What a come-down for the proud Mrs. Burton! If that report was true, that Mr. Wentworth proposed for his cousin and was angrily sent about his business, I should think they will be very sorry now, they lost a chance of settling her anyhow. Mrs. Burton will not find it so easy to get her an aristocratic *parti* now. As to Mr. Wentworth, he may congratulate himself that he is not more closely connected with them."

"I should think," answered Katharine, "that Mr. Wentworth would come forward again now, if he ever did propose for his cousin."

"Oh, Katharine! you never did believe that re-

port, I know," said Sophia, with a laugh that was half a sneer; "you think you know better."

"I would believe it as much as any one," said Katharine, "if it were at all a general report; but you are the only person I ever heard mention it, and you may have been misinformed."

"I am very doubtful about it myself, I assure you," said Sophia, "but I certainly did hear it, though I am not at liberty to give up my authority. I must say it astonished me very much, but, really, young men are such strange beings one can never judge from appearances. Otherwise, I assure you, Katharine ——"

"There is no occasion to discuss it," said Katharine, hastily; "we can all bear to remain in uncertainty about such a matter, I should think."

Mrs. James Thorpe smiled, and Katharine saw her do so: ah! her indifferent manner had been thrown away, poor girl! Sophia was not clever, but one woman can soon read another's feelings.

"It is time for me to go," said Katharine, after a short pause. "I have to call at cousin Bessy's on my way home."

She had quite forgotten about the oysters, but the practical Sophia now reminded her of her half-delivered message, and answered it by a ready acceptance of as many oysters as Mrs. Rivers chose to send. Really, James was always inviting gentlemen to supper these Christmas evenings, and "you

know, Katharine, what gentlemen are, when there is an oyster barrel before them; James never thinks that we may want them for sauce or patties at a dinner-party. We must have one next week; Katharine, you must come for it, and spend all the day with me. I shall not have room for the others."

Katharine assented, promised to remember the oysters, and took leave.

She had not much time to spend with cousin Bessy, for the evening was already closing in, and cousin Bessy, a terrible coward herself, never urged her young cousins to run the risk of being out in the dark.

"Dear me," she said, as Katharine was standing by the window, and declaring that it was growing so gloomy she must start at once, "what a pity Philip did not stay a few minutes longer, he could have taken care of you: not, I dare say, that you would have been too glad of his company."

"Philip!" repeated Katharine; "I did not know that he had returned from those great fairs in the north."

"Yes, my dear; he came home last night, and he had to go to the station this afternoon to see after some trucks or other, so he brought me a message from his mother—the regular invitation, you know, for Christmas day. Of course, I shall see you all at the Grange."

“I suppose so,” said Katharine; “it will be the usual party.”

“Philip told me that Miss Brooke was coming to-morrow,” pursued cousin Bessy. “I should have thought she might have stayed at home for Christmas. I know when I was a girl I would not have spent Christmas day out of my own home for any one.”

“I fancy Henrietta considers the Grange as much her home as any other,” observed Katharine.

“Ah, my dear, that she does,” said cousin Bessy, shaking her head; “it is a great deal too much her home, and she twists every one there round her little finger; if I were my cousin Thorpe, or his wife, I would not suffer it, but they have no resolution. Ah, my dear, if only Philip had a nice wife to take the daughter’s place in the house, it would be a different thing. If only he had been to your taste, Katharine!—but I won’t say anything about that. You are quite right, if you do not feel you could love him; and I know when I was young myself Philip is not the sort of young man that would have taken my fancy.”

“Henrietta manages matters at the Grange much better than I should do,” said Katharine; “but really I don’t see that aunt Thorpe requires any one to manage for her.”

“No, my dear; but a young head is a grand thing in a house, and keeps people alive.”

“Some persons would question the wisdom of that remark, I am afraid,” said Katharine, laughing, “and would give the praise to old and sage ones.”

“Of course, my dear; don’t misunderstand me; I never meant to say that young heads are as wise as old ones; how could they be, without experience? No; only a young girl going about a house makes it light and cheerful, and puts a spirit into things. Well, perhaps Philip may find some one who will have him, one of these days; but, Katharine, pray tell me, have you heard anything lately about that nice, gentlemanly Mr. Wentworth; Mrs. James was talking about him one day in a way I did not like.”

“I know nothing about him, cousin Bessy; and neither does Sophia, I fancy,” said Katharine. “I don’t know why everybody should make such a fuss wanting to find out where he is: he came to study with Mr. Manners, and having stayed the appointed time, he went away. Why should Sophia or any one else take so much trouble about the matter?”

“People sometimes come to study, and study more than books before they go away,” said cousin Bessy, sententiously; “you are quite right to say nothing about it, my dear, but I must say it vexes me, when people talk and hint about his attention to you, and wonder whether you are engaged, and if he is coming back, and so on.”

“His uncle Mr. Burton is ruined,” said Katharine, abruptly, to turn the subject.

“Gracious me! you don’t mean it, Katharine; and you kept all this news to the last moment. Tell me all about it.”

“I don’t know the particulars,” said Katharine. “Uncle James heard it at S——, but all will be in the papers to-morrow. I will take care that you have the newspaper early, but really I must not stay to talk now, it is getting quite dark.”

“Ruined! the rich Mr. Burton!” exclaimed cousin Bessy. “Well, for my part, I never put much trust in railways; Mrs. Elsley wanted me to have some shares once, she had been so fortunate with hers, but I am very glad I stood out against it; with a small income like mine one should not run risks. Well, if you are really going, and it does look dark certainly; but it was too bad not to mention this till just as you were running away.” A kiss terminated the sentence, and Katharine was suffered to depart.

The fortunes of the Burton family formed the subject of her thoughts on her homeward walk, or rather the influence they had or might have over Mr. Wentworth’s career. As she recalled his conversation before his first departure from Coverdale, and the total change in his manner and his way of speaking after his return, together with the report of his quarrel with his uncle, she became convinced

that the discovery of Mr. Burton's dishonourable proceedings must have been the cause of the alteration in his plans and views.

This accounted at once for his despondency with regard to his own prospects, and for his reserve upon the subject of his intercourse with his uncle.

Katharine's cheek glowed with pleasure as this explanatory idea flashed upon her: she gloried in the stainless honour which spurned indignantly all advantage to be gained by a sacrifice of principle; she appreciated also the delicacy which refused to give the slightest hint which could damage a relative's name, until its infamy was blazoned before the world. Marmaduke Wentworth had chosen to be silent rather than to bring forward an accusation which, as he was situated, would have been fruitless, except as a vindication of his own apparent instability: he had allowed his conduct to appear before her in an equivocal light, and had suffered her to doubt his truth. Doubt!—in the enthusiasm of the moment, Katharine could scarcely believe that she had ever doubted. At any rate she would doubt no longer; he was all that she had ever imagined him, and she trusted to time to clear up all mysteries. Even if she never met him again, she could scarcely be unhappy with this belief strong within her; a great and noble heart had been given to her, and she would keep the remembrance of it pure and clear;

such a blessing was surely enough for a life's happiness.

Wild and enthusiastic as Katharine's notions may seem, and liable to be deceived as the world may deem them, surely it is better to lead a life of trust and to preserve a loving, even a credulous heart, than to become, at the first misfortune, a gloomy cynical being, suspicious of all things and all people. And Katharine, it should be remembered, had not given her trust without any cause whatever; she was not a silly school-girl, believing every flattering word that was said to her; no: Marmaduke Wentworth had spoken all but decisive words, and as a man of honour those decisive words he must speak, unless forbidden by some weighty cause. Katharine half reproached herself for feeling in better spirits than usual; it seemed so unkind to derive any happiness from hearing of the sins and sorrows of others, but still she could not resist a sensation of joy, as she placed before herself the image of the man she loved in its undimmed purity; and she approached the house with a mind invigorated by her reflections, and fully prepared to contribute her share towards the family mirth, and to make the Christmas holidays as delightful as possible to those who had returned from school full of pleasant anticipations.

The fire-light streamed through the drawing-room windows, and as she walked up the garden path, she could distinctly see the party inside. The tea-tray

was on the table, and Mrs. Rivers was standing by it occupied in Katharine's usual business of making tea. Hester was reading by fire-light, seated on a low hassock; Caroline, in one corner of the room, was engaged in teaching Fanny and the boys a new dance, the music for which was overpoweringly audible from Henry's cornet. Mr. Rivers, in his arm-chair by the fire, was apparently studying his law affairs in the glowing coals, undisturbed by Henry's false notes or the noisy laughter of the boys. The only other members of the party somewhat surprised Katharine, or at any rate their position did: Agatha and Philip Thorpe were standing together at one of the windows, evidently absorbed in a private conversation.

A little annoyed at finding she should have to encounter Philip to-night, Katharine hurriedly passed the window, went into the house by the school-room door, and ran up-stairs.

Agatha and Philip were, indeed, engaged in a much more interesting conversation than usually took place between them, and Philip had visited Hazel Bank this evening almost on purpose to speak to Agatha. She happened to be in the room when he arrived, and as she was sitting alone in a window seat, he had no difficulty in gaining her exclusive attention. After exchanging a few words with the others, he went up to her, and began to say what he wanted in a business-like manner.

“On my way to W—— I went to see your place Greymore!” said he, abruptly. Agatha started, and looked up with astonished eyes. The very sound of the word Greymore had a charm for her, but to hear it from Philip Thorpe was most perplexing.

“What made you go to Greymore?” she asked.

“I had a curiosity to see it,” returned Philip; “but I should not have gone at this time of year, but for a conversation which I heard when I was waiting at the Brigsley station. Two people, who seemed to be farmers from the neighbourhood, were talking about your property, and from what they said I was convinced that some inquiries ought to be made about it.”

“About the property!” said Agatha. “At present it is no concern of mine: all that remains to me is let to Mr. Maynard.”

“I know that,” said Philip, “but when you let it, you were not aware of its value. A discovery has been made that those barren hills behind the grounds, just beyond the belt of firs, you know——”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Agatha, “go on.”

“These hills, which you let as mere waste land with the park and grounds, contain great quantities of iron-stone. I have now examined the country, and I am certain that iron will be found along the whole chain of hills, but probably your portion of land is the richest.”

“And it was never discovered till now,” said Agatha, doubtfully.

“It was never thought about, most likely,” said Philip, “though any one with the least knowledge of geology would have suspected the truth. But it seems that some labouring people discovered by accident, one day, that iron was to be met with; and a neighbouring farmer set to work with some very imperfect machinery. This is just as well, of course, for he has no right to the profits. When I heard this, I determined to go at once and speak to Mr. Maynard, for it was evident that you were being cheated out of your rights, and he, as your tenant, had no business to allow it. I don’t know whether you will think me officious for meddling with your affairs, but I should have done the same for a perfect stranger, as a matter of justice.”

Agatha listened in astonishment: a new phase in Philip’s character broke upon her; she had imagined him much too diffident to thrust himself upon a stranger’s notice; much too indifferent to undertake a piece of troublesome business: how had his *gaucherie* enabled him to get through an interview of this delicate nature? She only said, however—

“And what did Mr. Maynard say?”

“He was very civil,” returned Philip, “and said he thought me perfectly right to inquire into the thing; he knew very little about it himself, and did not wish to be troubled with it. A man had found

a piece of ironstone, and Farmer Thwaites had asked permission to look for more, which he had given. He believed that works of some kind or other had been put up, but he had never been to look at them ; of course, if the affair were to be profitable, Miss Marchmont's right was undisputed. He did not wish to have anything to do with it ; he could not be either at the expense or the trouble of working the iron ; he had only taken Greymore as a place where he could live quietly out of the season, and he had no money to risk in speculations. I asked him, if, supposing you wished to take that part of the land into your own hands, he would be unwilling to give it up. He said, no ; only in that case, the present agreement between you could not stand, but the rent must be lowered, and that if there were to be any noise of blasting, and furnaces, and such like things, he could not promise to remain your tenant at the expiration of the lease. I told him that, of course, I could not make any arrangements about your concerns, but one thing, as an *acquaintance* of yours, I felt I ought to insist upon, that Farmer Thwaites should cease his operations, and no one be allowed to touch the ground, till your pleasure was known."

"I thank you for your trouble," said Agatha, rather more graciously than usual ; "but I confess, I am at a loss what use to make of your information. It would be best, I think, for you to talk it over with my father. For my own part, I am rather like Mr.

Maynard, I have neither money nor taste for speculation, and I much dislike the idea of turning the Greymore moors into iron-works."

"But it is a shame, a sin, to waste such treasures," said Philip, warmly; "to keep iron that is wanted in so many important undertakings buried in the ground. And then the profit to yourself is certain, and will be great."

"I do not care much for money," said Agatha.

"But you would like to redeem the Greymore estates," said Philip. "I *know* that is your great wish; will you throw away such a chance as this? Before many years, you may believe me, you will be able to restore Greymore to its former state, and to live there, if you choose;" and Philip smiled slightly, remembering the conversation at Brakely.

An unwonted colour rose to Agatha's pale cheek.

"That is indeed a temptation, but still I do not see my way clearly; I have no money for such an undertaking, and I do not know how it could be managed."

"If you will hear a plan of mine," said Philip, "and give your consent to it, I can arrange everything with your father without troubling you much."

More and more astounded, Agatha nodded acquiescence.

"I want to leave the Grange," commenced Philip, speaking in short, abrupt sentences; "the life does

not suit me. I cannot bear it any longer. My education does not fit me for any regular profession; I like better than anything engineering and all connected with it. I think I could work the mines at Greymore well and profitably, and the occupation would suit me. I *know* I should succeed, and you might safely trust your interests to me. Everything is favourable for the undertaking. The place is within a convenient distance of Millboro, where you know iron is constantly wanted for public works, and there is every advantage of shipping. My father would give me capital to begin, and the works would soon pay for themselves. I want you to let me the ground, and for me to pay you a certain proportion of the profits. I will pay anything your father thinks right; I don't care for gain. I want the satisfaction of working at something I understand, and can make useful for the general good. I should feel that I was doing work fitted for me, instead of doing what Jacob Laws, the hind, can do better than I can."

Philip stopped suddenly, half ashamed of his flight of eloquence.

"I have no objection," answered Agatha, slowly; "you can speak to my father. But you surprise me very much, and I scarcely think that Mr. Thorpe will consent to your leaving the Grange."

"He will make difficulties at first, I know, but I shall convince him that I cannot be happy there any

longer," said Philip, "and in these days of railways the separation will be nothing; I can see my father and mother as often as they wish, even if I live at Greymore."

The conversation had proceeded thus far when Katharine caught sight of Philip and Agatha in the window, and at this point it began to languish. Philip had "said his say," and in the region of small talk his fluency deserted him! Agatha was not likely to help him, and they left the window by mutual consent. When Katharine entered the drawing-room, all were seated at or near the tea-table, Philip and Agatha at opposite extremities. Katharine mentioned in an assumed and overdone tone of indifference, the news she had heard about Mr. Burton, but found that it was already known. Mr. James Thorpe had been at the office with Mr. Rivers, and had, of course, told him everything.

Katharine now heard the affair explained in a less vague manner than she had done before, and, ignorant as she was of business, she could understand enough to be aware that Mr. Burton had acted in a way to awaken the scorn of all honourable men, and that numbers of innocent persons had been involved in his ruin through his shameful deceit.

The latter consideration aroused in Mrs. Rivers greater anger than anything else, and completely extinguished for the time all pity for himself and his family.

“There is never any good, as I have often told you, children,” said she, “in these quick, sudden ways of getting rich. The riches themselves are a great temptation when they do not come gradually, and so can be used soberly. This unfortunate man, no doubt, in his first successes, never imagined that he would fall into dishonest practices.”

“When once the mania for speculation seizes a person,” said Mr. Rivers, “I am never surprised at anything that befalls him; the spirit of gambling is always the same, and often does more real harm when it enters into matters of business, than on the turf or in the gaming-house.”

“The spirit of money getting, and pushing, and striving to rush into a position which Providence did not intend for us, must be always evil,” said Agatha, speaking with more animation than usual. “I should always expect that what people consider sudden good fortune would come to a sudden termination. Unfortunately examples do not serve as warnings, and people follow each other in the mad career.”

“I don’t quite agree with you,” said Katharine. “I cannot see the harm of trying to rise in the world; many do it without becoming so wrapt up in the love of money and gain as you seem to think necessary.”

“It depends upon why they wish to rise,” said Agatha; “but it is no use entering into the question. I know your opinions upon the subject, Ka-

tharine, and I know that they are totally opposed to mine."

"Between the two, we might perhaps find the just medium," remarked Mr. Rivers. "I don't know many of your notions, Agatha, but I know that Kate has always been wild for progress and improvement, and for large risks to obtain possible gains. Mr. Burton used to be one of her heroes."

"Oh, that was a long time ago, papa: I changed when he allowed himself to be taken up by the aristocracy."

"He has spoiled as fine a lot as was ever laid before any man," said Philip, energetically.

"So, Philip! are you an admirer of these go-ahead people?" asked Mr. Rivers.

"I am an admirer of any man who finds out a career for himself and keeps to it," said Philip; "I want to talk to you about something of the kind after tea," he added, in a low tone.

Mr. Rivers nodded assent: he was surprised at Philip's manner this evening; it was so much more independent and decided than usual.

"Mr. Burton was Mr. Wentworth's uncle," said Caroline, who had hitherto had no opportunity of joining in the conversation; "I wonder what he will think about it."

"It will not concern him much," said Henry, "for he and his uncle were not upon friendly terms."

"Were they not?" said Caroline. "I am sure at

Midsummer everybody used to say what a lucky thing it was for him to have such a rich uncle, and wonder that he did not enter into the same kind of business instead of reading at Coverdale, no one knew for what purpose."

"He threw away a grand chance," said Philip. "I only wish I had been in his place."

"And your father cannot bear the sight or sound of a railway!" exclaimed Mrs. Rivers.

"He might, perhaps, have kept his uncle right, if he had joined him," pursued Philip.

"Not such an easy matter, Philip, I should say," observed Mr. Rivers.

"I should not think Mr. Wentworth was suited for that kind of life," said Mrs. Rivers; "however, I suppose he will have to try to make his way in the world now, for he can have nothing to look forward to: he must depend upon himself."

"And the best thing in the world for him, if I understand anything about him," said Mr. Rivers; "I should not think he was wanting in energy or action when it came to the proof."

"Though he certainly did appear rather a dawdle," added Henry.

"Aunt Sophia said one day that he wanted to marry his cousin, Mr. Burton's daughter, because she would have a great deal of money," said Fanny; "but I don't believe it."

"At any rate, he is well out of it now," said

Henry, "for she will not be a very first-rate match."

"Mr. Wentworth will have something else to think about than marriage for many years to come," said Mr. Rivers. "No man should marry before he is thirty, even if he is well off."

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed Fanny, "and cousin Bessy said one day that you were only twenty-four when you were married."

"I might, perhaps, have done more wisely, Miss Puss," answered her father. "Don't you know that in some things we must teach by precept and warning, and not by example?"

Mr. Rivers spoke lightly, but to Agatha's morbid sensitiveness with respect to anything that could concern her mother's memory, the light words seemed to cast a reproach upon his early choice. Doubtless he would have been happier had his first marriage been blotted from his remembrance, and had nothing existed to remind him of it! She, the child of that early union, was unvalued and uncared for!

Tea was over by this time, so she rose and left the room. No one imagined that she had any particular cause for absenting herself; indeed, not one of that cheerful, united circle, could comprehend the troubles that Agatha was continually making for herself out of the like trivialities. She had now lived in her father's house for almost a year, yet she was scarcely less a stranger than she had been

at her arrival; her life was altogether apart from the rest of the family; there was no community of opinion or feeling between her and the others. For a short time, indeed, in the early summer, there had been a little brightening of Agatha's gloom, and she had shown herself rather more ready to meet the advances of those around her, but this slight gleam of cheerfulness and sociability had quickly vanished, when the delusion which had given rise to it had been dispelled.

Agatha's discovery that she had been thinking too much of Mr. Wentworth, and that he did not think of her, had embittered all her newly-awakened feelings of affection, all her hopes of ever finding satisfaction in her present way of life; and the conviction that Katharine was preferred to her had roused all the mortification and jealousy of which her repressed, passionate nature was capable. It mattered not that he had gone, that Katharine was apparently forgotten by him; Agatha felt instinctively that Katharine possessed the love which she could not win.

How she hated herself for having desired it! How she strove to crush within her proud heart every lingering thought of him! How she accused him of instability and deceit, and Katharine of cunning and coquetry! And afterwards, perhaps, in moments of less irritation, wept tears of bitter, self-reproach for her own wrong and unjust thoughts!

How she called her strength to aid her; her firm, indomitable will, and chafed at her weakness, and wearied herself out with efforts to obtain, through the force of her own nature, a calmness impossible to be gained by such means!

The struggle which tore her very soul in the solitude of her chamber, was not without its influence upon her daily conduct; more than ever gloomy in society, she was also more easily annoyed; her highly-wrought feelings were perpetually receiving some shock; she was always suspecting some slight, and fancying that others had guessed, and were sneering at, her secret; a trifling remark of a child like Fanny was often enough to poison her peace for a whole day; and the least fancied assumption of superiority on Katharine's part was enough to call forth all her bitterness, and prevent anything like friendly intercourse. At such times, if Katharine tried to be kind, she was thought patronizing; if she appeared indifferent, she was considered contemptuous. Enough for the present: Agatha's actions must show more clearly the disturbed state of her mind.

She had not been long in her own room, brooding over all she had this evening heard, when she received a summons from her father. As she expected, he wished to speak with her about the information Philip Thorpe had just given him of the discovery which had been made at Greymore. Philip, after

telling Mr. Rivers everything, and begging him to use all his influence that the scheme he had formed might be carried out, had left the house, and Agatha found her father alone.

He now explained to her more clearly than Philip had done all the advantages which this scheme promised. He had lately become acquainted with Philip's talents in one particular direction, and he believed that an undertaking of this kind was peculiarly suited to his powers. He knew that Philip was not the humdrum commonplace person that he appeared, and that he possessed faculties and energies which only required drawing forth by a fitting mode of life; faculties which seemed paralysed in his present occupation, where the exercise of his own judgment and free-will was denied him, Mr. Thorpe's farming operations being carried on according to the most antique methods, and every recent application of science or common sense being regarded as a dangerous innovation. Another consideration had weight with Mr. Rivers, and induced him to look favourably on Philip's plan; he knew that with him Agatha's interests would be perfectly secure, gain would be with him a secondary consideration, and his dealings would be guided by the strictest justice and the nicest honour. Altogether, he believed that the best thing his daughter could do, was to trust to Philip the working of the iron; and he now told Agatha this conclusion, and his reason for it.

With respect to Philip's knowledge of engineering, he was not solely guided by his own judgment; some time ago, he had been told by an eminent scientific man, who had been called to the neighbourhood to decide some doubtful question which had arisen about an injury caused by some manufactories to lands in the vicinity, that Philip Thorpe had a remarkable turn for everything connected with engineering and geology, and that in his present career his talents were completely wasted, and, indeed, completely concealed, for, except in the society of a kindred mind, he never allowed them to be suspected.

Agatha listened to all her father said, and agreed to all he proposed. His idea was, that Philip should be, not exactly her tenant, but a sort of part-proprietor in the works to be erected; he would furnish most of the capital, but then the land was hers; and it would be possible to make some arrangement by which Philip would be remunerated for his outlay and trouble, and yet Agatha would receive her full due of the profits arising from her own property.

She was interested in what her father said, on account of the hope of more speedily redeeming the Greymore estates, but the details of business wearied her, and she could scarcely help fancying, that the old masters of the Priory would have deemed it a degradation to owe returning prosperity to such means.

CHAPTER V.

THE LOST LETTER.

It was the morning of Christmas eve: most of the members of the Rivers family were in a state of pleasant excitement, preparing the Christmas-tree, or looking forward to the first sight of it; finishing their presents, and, in the case of the younger ones, speculating upon the treasures that would fall to their share. Agatha had conformed to the family usage so far as to buy a present for each of her brothers and sisters, but, having entrusted these to the care of Katharine and Hester, she had taken no further interest in the matter.

Not that she disapproved of the proceedings that were going forward; on the contrary, she was inclined in theory towards everything that tended to promote a cheerful observance of Christmas, and to revive the festivities of the "good old times;" but it was not her nature to enter much into plots and surprises, and preparations for grand effects, and she willingly left these affairs to others.

She was sitting in her own room, poring over a

map of the county in which Greymore was situated, endeavouring to find the precise spot where the iron had been discovered, and to recall to her mind the exact formation of the chain of hills. She had had some further conversation with Philip Thorpe on the subject, and had heard from him a description of the position of the beds of ironstone, and of the probable direction the ore would take along the hills; but Philip's account was necessarily burdened with some technical terms, which she, not having even a smattering of geology, could not understand. She thought Philip seemed astonished at her ignorance, and she really began to feel rather ashamed of knowing nothing of a subject so practically useful, and to confess to herself that her prejudices against geology as a science were unfounded, and that perhaps she was a little narrow-minded, in so resolutely shutting up her intellect against every kind of knowledge which did not bear the stamp of antiquity.

She resolved that she would, at least, master the rudiments of the science, and she made up her mind to order a book that very day for her instruction. She never thought of consulting any one as to the best mode of commencing her study, though she knew that Philip Thorpe could have lent her suitable books, and directed her attention to the most useful sources; she did not even apply to her sisters, though, as they had a slight acquaintance with the subject, they probably possessed some elementary

books. It was not her way to ask advice; she always did things independently, and on her own responsibility, and her pride did not permit her to own at once that she had begun to take an interest in what she had formerly condemned.

She remembered having seen in *The Times* a few days before, an advertisement of some rudimentary works of science, and, although she had a prejudice against knowledge made easy, she thought perhaps some of them might suit her. Quickly putting on her out-door costume, she determined to walk to Fairfield to give an order to the bookseller, looking for the advertisement before she started. There was a small room within the drawing-room, in which old newspapers, magazines, &c., were generally kept, and thither Agatha proceeded to make her search.

Both the drawing-room and the little room within were vacant, so she was quite undisturbed, and she soon succeeded in finding the paper containing the advertisement she required. She copied into her note-book the titles of the books which seemed likely to suit her, and then replaced the newspapers. But in doing so, her attention was caught by a debate upon a subject which interested her. She was not in the habit of reading the papers regularly, so she had missed reading the debate at the time when it occurred, and she now took up the paper and began looking over it. She became interested, and the debate was a long one; but as there was plenty of

time for her to walk to Fairfield and back before dinner, she sat down to read it deliberately. Presently she heard voices in the drawing-room; those of Mrs. James Thorpe and Hester. She was not inclined to disturb herself, and particularly disinclined to encounter Mrs. James, so she resolved to remain where she was, thinking that before she wished to proceed on her walk, the visitor would probably depart. She was sitting behind the door, and she slightly pushed it to, so that she might be as little as possible disturbed by the sound of the voices in the other room, and then she turned her whole attention to her newspaper.

Meantime, Sophia and Hester continued talking, and were joined gradually by the rest of the girls, who were a little curious to know what had brought their young aunt from Fairfield on this uninviting morning.

Sophia's object in coming was to tell a very important piece of news, which she had just received, and was desirous of spreading at once. Her sister Arabella was engaged to be married, and she wished to see the effect upon Katharine and Hester, of the information that their old companion had distanced them in the matrimonial race. The news was too precious to be delivered immediately, but had to be guessed and puzzled about for some time. As, however, Katharine and Hester had received previous hints from Sophia in conversation, and from

Lucy Grover in letters, that "a certain gentleman" had been "most marked in his attentions" to Arabella, they soon came to the true conclusion of the case.

Then they had to hear a great deal about the wordly prospects of the "certain gentleman," and a glowing account of his personal appearance, manners, &c., Sophia having once seen him for five minutes at a railway station.

The girls were becoming almost weary of the subject, when Fanny, who had been a by no means inattentive listener, interrupted one of Sophia's speeches by saying,

"Dear, how funny it will be for Arabella to be married; I am sure I always thought she used to like Mr. Wentworth."

"What an idea, Fanny!" exclaimed Sophia; "don't you know, you silly little thing, that young ladies never like gentlemen till they have proposed for them?"

"Oh, I know you don't really mean that, aunt Sophia," returned Fanny; "and I am sure I believe all the girls here liked Mr. Wentworth, he was so much nicer than any one else."

"You have seen so few people, you cannot judge," said Mrs. James, with a matronly air, "and really I never heard a child express such notions as you do."

“Be quiet, Fanny,” said Katharine.

But Fanny did not heed Katharine’s speech, or Hester’s look of severity; she was in a talkative mood, and she continued :

“I wish Mr. Wentworth would come back, and I know who else would be pleased : you need not look so, Katharine, I don’t mean you in particular ; but Henrietta Brooke would be just as glad as any one, and Caroline would too, and all of them except Hester, and I don’t think she cares so much about him as the rest.”

“And which of them would he be pleased to see, Fanny ?” asked Mrs. James Thorpe, apparently forgetting that she had just reproved Fanny for this kind of chattering.

“Oh, I know,” answered the child, meaningly, “and you know too, aunt Sophia, but I must not say it aloud.”

“I think I can guess,” said Sophia ; “but I am afraid, Fanny, Mr. Wentworth must be a great flirt, or else all these young ladies would not like him. He must persuade them that he likes all of them. Let me see, you mentioned Henrietta Brooke, and the nameless person, and Caroline.”

“What rubbish !” interrupted the latter.

“And Cecilia Walters,” continued Fanny, delighted at being allowed to talk, “and Grace Oakenshaw.”

“Do not encourage her, please, Sophia,” exclaimed Katharine; “she is quite giddy this morning.”

But Sophia took no heed.

“And Cecilia, and Grace,” she repeated, “and—and Miss Marchmont,—is it not so, Fanny?”

“Yes,” returned Fanny, “only I was afraid to say so, but I thought it all the time.”

“Really you are too bad, Fanny,” said Hester; “what would Agatha say at having her name brought in in this manner?”

“Whatever she may say, it is quite true,” said Sophia; “I found out Miss Marchmont, prim as she seems. I remember a look I once saw on her face the night of the gipsy-tea in Underwood, Katharine. What Fanny and I have been saying about the others is all nonsense of course, but there was no nonsense about Miss Marchmont’s feelings that night, or I am much mistaken. I am afraid Mr. Wentworth must have been a little to blame in flirting with her; you know he used to talk to her a good deal; I dare say she thought he meant something serious.”

“Oh, impossible!” said Katharine, with an incredulous laugh. “I am sure he would as soon have thought of flirting with cousin Bessy as with Agatha. Why, she is as old as he is, and, from her manner, seems far beyond an age to have anything to do with flirting. He liked talking to her, I dare say, but not in the way you mean, I am sure, and she could not be so stupid as to fancy anything of

the kind. Oh, it is too ridiculous, Sophia! the idea of Agatha!"

"How she takes it up, does not she, Hester?" exclaimed Sophia; "well, I suppose you ought to be considered good authority, Katharine, but even if Mr. Wentworth never said anything particular to Agatha, you cannot answer for the mistakes people make about such things. Proud and reserved as Miss Marchmont appears, I dare say she is as willing as any one to believe she is admired, and I should not think she has been in the way of receiving much attention, so she might fancy Mr. Wentworth meant something by talking to her, and, you know, Katharine, that he did talk to her a great deal."

"But why make talking of such importance?" said Katharine; "really, Sophia, you must imagine that people are always looking out for attention. I cannot think Agatha would be so silly and miss-ish as to mistake the mere attention of a gentleman for anything else. She could not be so ridiculous as to think he——"

"Loved her," interrupted Sophia; "it seems absurd certainly, but one can never tell. I can quite imagine your incredulity, Katharine, for he paid you so much more attention; but then I don't think she found that out at first, and when she did I never saw any one look more jealous than she did, and, after all, why did he talk to her so much?"

“I suppose because he found her agreeable,” said Hester; “you know Agatha is very sensible and clever.”

“I know he thought her clever,” said Katharine, “and I think it rather amused him to draw out her opinions.”

“You know all about it, Katharine,” said Sophia, laughing.

“Not more than any one with common observation could find out,” said Katharine; “I cannot suppose any one so blind as not to discover that Mr. Wentworth’s behaviour to Agatha was only that of a—in short, I could not dream of anybody carrying on a flirtation with her, and somehow one never thinks of serious love-making in connection with Agatha. I cannot fancy her engaged or married. I wonder you think of talking of her in the same way as you would of——” here Katharine stopped, and laughed, for she saw Sophia was amused at her taking up the subject so earnestly.

“You cannot imagine any one making love to Agatha when you are disengaged, that is the long and the short of the matter, Katharine,” said Sophia; “but, you know, some people say, or used to say, that you were engaged to Philip. and there is such a thing as a person’s feeling his way. Mr. Wentworth might talk to Agatha in order to——”

“Oh, pray don’t make any more conjectures,” interrupted Katharine; “do leave Agatha and Mr.

Wentworth alone, and conclude that they are engaged to each other if you will."

"Nay, I don't will it at all," said Sophia, laughing, "and I am sure nothing would make you believe it yourself. Only fancy such a pair!"

Katharine could not help laughing again, the idea seemed so absurd.

At this moment, the door of the inner room opened and Agatha entered, and walked towards the group of talkers. All were somewhat startled, for who could tell how much of the past conversation she had heard?

Katharine made a faint attempt at pleasantry.

"Oh, Agatha, you may as well help us to defend ourselves; we, the young ladies of this neighbourhood, are accused of losing our hearts to the same gentleman, and without his having given us the right to do so."

"I did not know that *your* right was questioned," answered Agatha, slowly, "and as for defence, the matter is not worth it. I think it right, however, to say, that I have heard nearly the whole of your conversation. I ought to have interrupted it sooner perhaps, but I did not think it worth while, and avoided listening as much as possible; still, having heard a great deal that was not intended for my ears, I consider it a point of honour to tell you so."

Mrs. James Thorpe laughed, half nervously, half sneeringly.

“Really, Miss Marchmont, it amuses me to see the grave way you treat a bit of fun!”

Agatha made no reply, but she saw that her gravity was a mistake; she would have given a good deal just then for the power of saying a few light words, but *badinage* was not her *forte*, and she could not even manage to smile. She turned to the others.

“I am going into Fairfield; have you any commissions?”

“Oh,” exclaimed Hester, “our old postwoman is laid up with rheumatism to-day, so we have to wait for our letters till papa comes home in the evening; perhaps you would not mind calling at the post-office for them, Agatha.”

“Papa will have sent for them before now,” said Katharine.

“I don’t think he will,” said Hester, “for you know his own letters and newspapers would go to the office as usual, and he would leave ours, I dare say, till he had to pass the post-office in the evening. And mamma expects a letter to-day, I know she will be glad to get it at once.”

“I will call at the post-office,” said Agatha, and she left the room.

She was soon walking on the Fairfield road, battling with the tumultuous thoughts which had been aroused by the conversation she had just heard. The degradation of being so talked about affected

her keenly, and, strange to say, Katharine's incredulity was more annoying to her than Mrs. James Thorpe's remarks.

It seemed to indicate the immense difference between herself and Agatha, where Mr. Wentworth was concerned.

Agatha even fancied that she could detect a feeling of superiority in the way in which Katharine had listened to Sophia's insinuations, and the tone which she had used in saying the words, "It is too ridiculous, Sophia! the idea of Agatha!" &c.

It must also be confessed, weak-minded though it may seem, and inconsistent with Agatha's general character, that part of her mortification arose from the certainty that Katharine could not be made jealous of her. Though not engaged to Mr. Wentworth herself, she could not, it appeared, imagine the possibility of his advancing even so far as flirtation with her elder sister.

Agatha felt that much was implied by this incredulity: a contempt for her own qualities; a disbelief in her power to charm; an insinuation against her gravity, her unattractiveness, her want of youthful bloom and grace. She might, perhaps, become respected, but she was not a person to win love!

Agatha knew her defects on the points which she believed Katharine most valued, and yet she was angry with her for refusing to acknowledge the qualifications which ought to have counterbalanced

them. But, after all, why blame Katharine in particular? She was only like Mr. Wentworth. He who was, she imagined, capable of appreciating more solid gifts, had been led away by a bright smile and a pleasant manner. He had prized a gay, youthful temperament above an earnest, thoughtful intellect—versatile acquirement above inward cultivation. With the blindness which generally affected Agatha with respect to Katharine, she failed to discern that the real attractions which made her preferred had a deeper source than in the shallow trivialities in which she readily allowed her superiority; and that in the important qualities of candour, amiability, warm sympathy, and trustfulness, she was herself far inferior.

Long before Agatha supposed she had accomplished the distance, she found herself at the entrance of Fairfield, yet her ideas were scarcely more settled than when she commenced her walk. It was a disagreeable day: there had been snow a few days previously, and this morning a thaw had begun; there was a damp chillness in the air, much more trying in general to Agatha than the bracing cold of frosty weather, and a raw, gusty wind blew at intervals, bringing with it a sort of Scotch mist. But to-day she felt no discomfort from wind or weather, except that a kind of depression seemed added to her other miseries; regardless of mud and wet, she paced along the splashy road, and, utterly indifferent to soiled boots or dragged dress, she crossed the market-place to the book-

seller's shop. As it was most frequently her destination when she went to Fairfield, she walked there almost mechanically, but when she arrived, she had forgotten her errand; fortunately, the note-book, which she had unconsciously carried in her hand, restored her recollection. In her ordinary calm, haughty manner she ordered her books, and then proceeded to the adjoining post-office.

Three letters were produced in answer to her inquiries: one for Mrs. Rivers; one for Miss Caroline Rivers, the direction written in violet ink, in a school-girl's hand; the third, which was under the others, was addressed to Miss Rivers, in a handwriting that Agatha recognized only too readily.

With a strange, sudden pang, she thrust the letters into her pocket, and stepped into the street.

That this letter, of all others, should arrive on this day—the day in which she had been exposed to so much mortification! that she should be the person to deliver a letter so important, so precious, to Katharine—to see the triumphant glance with which she would receive this assurance that her belief in Mr. Wentworth's preference was not a false one!

For the letter was from him; the hand was not a common one, and she had seen it many a time. Not that Agatha had ever received a note from him. She had, indeed, in her possession a scrap or two of paper with “Miss Marchmont, with Mr. Wentworth's kind regards,” or “best thanks,” in-

scribed upon them, but she had seen notes lying about the house, answers to invitations, &c., and songs which he had copied for Katharine and Hester, quite sufficient altogether to make his writing familiar to her. Nay, she even remembered his manner of writing the words "Miss Rivers," and when she had left the town and was free from observation, she took the letter from her pocket, to compare the address with her recollection. Yes; it was certainty: the letter in her hand was written by Marmaduke Wentworth, filled probably with protestations of affection, loving words, sweet, fond hopes.

Agatha's lips were firmly pressed together, and she stood still to subdue the trembling of her frame. In one moment all the thoughts which had accumulated in her mind during the last few months started into life, and roused a burst of passion within her. She almost hated both him and Katharine: what a fall had they occasioned her from her lofty eminence of calm self-sufficingness! She, who had deemed herself incapable of being moved by common feminine weakness, to be lowered thus to bemoan a lost affection — an affection which, after all, if freely offered to her, would have scarcely deserved her acceptance! She, the clear-judging and far-sighted, to have been thus deceived into imagining perfection which did not exist, and love which had never been felt for *her*. Oh! he must have been false and double-dealing, or she could never for one moment

have given way to such a delusion ; and Katharine too ! she must have used art and cunning, or all might have been different.

Alas for us when we try to shield ourselves from self-reproach for our follies, by the fancied injuries and faults of others ! Agatha's thoughts were wild and sinful, and she did not strive against them ; at such moments, a thought so evil and daring that it would another time be rejected with horror gains admittance to the mind.

There was a little bridge across the stream about half way between Fairfield and Hazel Bank, and Agatha had arrived at this point, and was standing looking at the letter, when a sudden idea struck her.

Evidently this was the first time Mr. Wentworth had written to Katharine, otherwise the circumstance would have been known in the family, for she did not suspect Katharine of carrying on a clandestine correspondence. Why he had so long delayed writing was a mystery, which the letter would doubtless explain ; everything would be settled at once, for Agatha did not see any of the difficulties which might have occurred to a girl brought up in more worldly ways. He would return to Hazel Bank : she would have to behold the betrothed couple together, to watch their marks of affection, to feel that perhaps they ridiculed the notion of *her* name ever having been coupled with his—heavens ! it was intolerable. And the letter in her hand, the

letter that Katharine would receive from her hand, must cause all this : what if that letter never reached its destination ? what if, as she now stood leaning over the bridge, her grasp were slightly to relax, and that small, unconscious instrument of her torture were to fall into the stream, and be floated away for ever ?

Agatha did not dwell for a moment upon the idea that it was possible for her to *commit* such a deed ; but she considered all the consequences of it, of the difference to her future happiness, or at least of the lessened misery that would fall to her share, if, through some means or other, Katharine never received the letter.

And she did not think that the loss to Katharine would be so very great : she had no deep feelings ; she was pleased to be liked by Mr. Wentworth, but in a short time she would be tired of waiting for him, and would be just as pleased and as proud at captivating some one else.

And they would not be a well-matched couple : Marmaduke Wentworth, whatever his faults might be, was yet far superior to Katharine Rivers in intellect and heart ; he could not surely continue to be charmed with the qualities which had first attracted him. They would soon tire of singing duets and discussing trifling books together ; the piquancy of Katharine's remarks would wear off, and he would find her notions crude and wild and flighty. The

loss of the letter might be no loss in reality to either of them, and how little was required to make it as a thing that had never been !

Yet that little Agatha would not do ; she had not so far lost all sense of right, and her own self-respect. She would not commit the outward act, but she dallied with the evil thought. With a hasty gesture she turned to proceed homeward ; she had been standing looking at the stream, but with her face slightly towards the town. As she turned round, she encountered a side gust of wind, so strong and sudden that it blew back her cloak, which had been merely closed at the throat, and loosened the fastening ; in the instinctive effort she made to seize the cloak and draw it round her, she was obliged to use both hands ; one of them held the letter.

It slipped from her fingers, and before she could catch it, the wind had driven it backwards, it rested for an instant on the parapet of the bridge, she rushed towards it, but it had already fallen into the stream—*just as she had wished it to fall two minutes before !*

Her wish was accomplished ; the letter was gone, yet she would have given worlds to recover it. She leaned over the side of the bridge, but she could see nothing of it ; it must have floated down the stream, and she sprang to the opposite side of the bridge, for the current was in that direction.

But not a trace of the letter met her view, though

she strained her sight to the uttermost. Regardless of cold and wind and driving sleet, Agatha lingered long on the bridge, looking now over one side, now over the other, then, scrambling through the hedge at the side of the road, she groped about amongst the stones and bushes at the edge of the stream, thinking the letter might have drifted there and become entangled, but all to no purpose. Again she took up her station on the bridge, and gave a long last look down the stream. Still no letter could she discover, and she was compelled to believe that it was lost for ever. She now pursued her way home as fast as she could, for, little as she cared for personal discomfort, she felt that in her present wet, muddy condition, exposed to the chilling penetrating sleet, it would be folly to loiter.

But as she approached Hazel Bank, she lessened her speed, and began to consider how she should account to Katharine for the loss of her letter. Very likely Katharine would be the person to inquire the result of her visit to the post-office; how, then, should she deliver to her the letters for Mrs. Rivers and Caroline, and acknowledge that she had lost the one which had arrived for herself?

And then Katharine, always eager about her correspondence, would be certain to ask questions about the handwriting and post-mark. What answer could she give? how say, that she knew the writing to be Mr. Wentworth's, feeling conscious of her previous

thoughts and wishes? How should she encounter Katharine's glance of surprise and suspicion?

Oh! the misery caused by one evil thought! Had Agatha turned resolutely away from imagining the possible results of committing a weak and wicked wrong towards Katharine, it would never have entered her brain to dream that Katharine should suspect her of such a deed. But now that she had committed the wrong in thought, though not in act, it seemed to her that Katharine, finding other letters forthcoming and not her own, and recalling Mrs. James Thorpe's words of that very morning, would attribute its loss to *her*—to her jealousy.

A wild imagination like this would, at another time, have been instantly dismissed by Agatha, but at present her mind was unstrung by the fierce passions she had been indulging. She was aware, besides, that all self-command would desert her before Katharine; the bare idea that she might entertain such a suspicion, and the consciousness of how near that suspicion was to the truth, would totally unnerve her. She knew that she could not explain in a light tone and manner how she had lost the letter; she knew that, if Katharine questioned her about the writing, she must answer that it was Mr. Wentworth's; she must answer trembling, and confused. She *could not equivocate*; for that, she had too much pride, and too little readiness and control of words. She could not equivocate, but *she could be silent*, and act a lie.

Without coming to any precise conclusion on the subject, but with a suggestion of this kind glancing through her mind, Agatha entered the house. In the passage she met Katharine and Hester, on their way up-stairs to prepare for dinner.

Katharine was the first to speak :

“ Any letters, Agatha ? ”

“ One for your mother, and one for Caroline,” answered Agatha, producing the letters.

“ And were there no others ? ” said Katharine, as she took them.

“ No others,” repeated Agatha, and she passed the girls, and went to her room.

What was all the misery of her past life to that which she felt now when she had closed the door, and was alone with her altered self ? The act which of all others she had despised, which of all others she had deemed unlikely for her to commit, she had committed—she had told a lie.

She did not attempt to call it by a gentler name : she knew what she had done, and she knew that nothing could ever restore her self-respect. It was not merely its sinfulness that weighed upon her ; it was its weakness : she had failed in moral courage, the quality she most admired, and in which she had never imagined herself deficient.

Well, the deed was done ; it could not be undone, and she must bear the pain ensuing from it in silence.

Could not be undone ? might she not, at least, have

confessed her falsehood to Katharine? No : Agatha's penitence was not deep enough, her moral courage not high enough, for that. Bitter as was her self-humiliation, the consciousness that another knew her weakness would have been still more bitter. She, who had held herself so far above the ordinary world—who had shown such horror of deceit and meanness—who had professed to be governed by higher principles than those which actuated the circle around her—how should she acknowledge that she had fallen so low—how expose the motives which had led to her degradation?

Agatha was always grave and quiet; otherwise her abstraction that day at dinner must have been noticed; fortunately, too, for her, the rest were too much occupied with anticipations of their Christmas pleasures to pay heed to a few words more or less from her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LETTER FOUND.

KATHARINE was far from guessing how near happiness had been to her this day, and yet her spirits were raised above their usual level. The satisfactory manner in which she had accounted to herself for all that had hitherto appeared mysterious in Mr. Wentworth's behaviour imparted an ease to her mind which she had not felt before in spite of her instinctive trust in him, and the slight reproof which her mother had administered about her inattention, a few days before, had made her doubly watchful to discover the claims of others upon her time and thoughts; as a natural consequence, she was happier in proportion as she was carried out of herself. Never had she bestowed so much care and trouble upon the holiday amusements of the younger ones as she now did; never before had she made her little Christmas gifts so truly a labour of love. If, occasionally, when witnessing Fanny's enthusiasm, or listening to the uproarious laughter of her young brothers, she experienced a sinking at the heart, a longing to be

again a child, she tried to check the feeling, and more earnestly to rejoice with those who rejoiced.

Katharine had never been wanting in sympathy; but trial called forth its exercise more fully; the consciousness of how deeply, for a few short months, she had been absorbed in her own affairs, lay like a reproach upon her affectionate heart, and she longed to make up to her beloved ones, for the brief period in which it seemed to her that she had not sufficiently prized their love. Soon after tea, Katharine and Hester shut themselves up in the dining-room, to give the finishing touches of decoration to the Christmas-tree: the door was locked, and, with the exception of a tall housemaid, to light the upper tapers, no one was admitted.

The rest of the party were in the drawing-room, the younger ones playing games by the firelight, for the shutters had not been closed, nor candles brought, tea having been unusually early to give time for the preparations for the evening.

Mr. Rivers and Henry had not yet come home, and Mrs. Rivers was standing by the window looking for them, whilst Fanny, in the midst of her play, was keeping watch over a little tray near the fire, containing tea which had been kept apart to refresh her papa, and the toast which she was to butter for him.

Agatha was in the room leaning back in an arm-chair, utterly wearied with thinking, and now, not

thinking exactly, but watching all that was going on, in a dreamy manner, glad to catch at anything that could, for a few moments, divert her attention from herself.

“Fanny, papa is coming,” exclaimed Mrs. Rivers, suddenly, and Fanny ceased romping, and went towards the fire and toast, whilst Agatha jumped up, recollecting that she was occupying her father’s chair.

“Oh, no,” said Mrs. Rivers, a moment afterwards, “it is not papa; I see now, it is Philip Thorpe: he has left his horse at the gate, and is coming in. Run, Willie, and open the door for your cousin.”

Philip entered the room, as if aware that he was not expected, and that his appearance required to be accounted for.

“My mother told me to call and say, that she wishes you to bring Hannah with you to-morrow, for her mother and sisters are to dine with the servants, and she thinks Hannah will like to be with them.”

“Certainly,” answered Mrs. Rivers; “your mother is very kind to think of it. But sit down, Philip, your uncle and Henry will be here directly.”

“I cannot stay,” said Philip, “and I know you are all busy to-night.”

“Katharine and Hester are making the tree ready,” said Fanny; “you had better stay and see it, cousin Philip.”

But Philip did not attend; he had approached Agatha, who was leaning against the chimney-piece.

“I came partly to see you,” he said to her; “I have some property to restore to you. This morning I found a letter, which——”

Agatha started, and made, instinctively, a gesture of silence. Though he was not speaking loud, yet, at any moment, some one in the room might draw near and overhear him; she felt bound at all risks to stop him.

Philip looked astonished, but was silent, and put his hand in his pocket as if to search for something. At this instant, Fanny approached the fire to prepare her papa’s toast, Mrs. Rivers having again announced his appearance. Agatha hastily put her hand on Philip’s arm, saying, impressively:

“Another time, not now.”

Philip, more than ever perplexed, withdrew his hand from his pocket, but could not resist raising his eyes inquiringly to Agatha’s face. He met a look so agitated and imploring, that he could scarcely believe he was gazing upon Agatha’s countenance, usually so calm, passionless, and immovable. He did not say another word to her, and with a general “Good evening” to the rest of the party, he quitted the room, as Mr. Rivers and Henry entered it.

Agatha remained standing where he had left her, utterly bewildered. How could Philip have gained possession of the letter? She had searched for it

intently, and to no purpose ; how could it be, that he, who knew nothing of the loss, had found it? And why had he brought it to her, and not to Katharine, to whom it was addressed?

She could only conclude that he had been on the road, or in the fields, and had seen her fruitless search ; afterwards, he must have had the curiosity to try to find out the object of her quest, and, as it appeared, with a more successful result than she had had. Still, why bring the letter to her instead of Katharine? And now, what must he think of her strange desire for concealment ; why had she not taken the letter at once, and delivered it to its proper owner? why had she demeaned herself to ask secrecy from Philip Thorpe? All Agatha's former self-humiliation sank into nothingness before this—the idea of having admitted to Philip that she had a secret, of having begged him to check his revelations by an imploring glance, a familiar movement ; that to him, of all men in the world, she should have compromised her dignity so far as to have entered into a private understanding with him.

And she could never explain herself to him ; doubtless at some favourable opportunity he would deliver the letter to her ; how could she account to him for her desire of mystery respecting a letter not, after all, addressed to herself? What could she do with the letter itself, when it was again in her possession? How could she give it to Katharine, without con-

fessing her falsehood, and the degrading motives which had led to it? The more she thought, the further she lost herself in a labyrinth of difficulties. Perhaps, a person more versed in the ways of deceit might have found a clue: a string might have been formed of accidents, forgetfulness, carelessness, which would have served her purpose. But this was not Agatha's way; the same disposition which had led her to tell a direct falsehood, instead of equivocating, would lead her now to stand by it, unless she could resolve to confess everything.

It was no wonder that Agatha was abstracted, and indifferent to all the glories of the Christmas-tree; she followed the rest mechanically into the room where it was displayed, but she looked at it from a distance, and did not advance to seek for treasures under its branches.

Yet she had not been forgotten, and after a time Fanny brought to her, in her apron, a collection of miscellaneous articles which had been found marked with her name, and the others came up to kiss and thank her for her presents to them.

At another time, Agatha might have been touched by the little tokens which showed her that, after all, she was considered one of the family; she would have been pleased to find that her peculiar tastes had been marked and consulted; that the book her father had given her was one which she had talked of, and wished to possess; that Fanny had made her a book-

marker of true mediæval design; that the collar which Katharine had worked for her was of a shape she liked, but an unfashionable one, and, therefore, must, she knew, have been a pain and grief to Katharine during the working, from her own predilection for new things; but here Agatha stopped in her examination of her presents, and hastily dropped the collar she was holding; it seemed to burn her hand; she could not bear the idea that Katharine had made anything for her, or had thought of her kindly.

“Well, I think people might appear a little pleased with their presents,” said Caroline to Hester, in an audible whisper.

“Hush, Caroline,” returned Hester; “she is thinking of last year at this time; you know it was just after Christmas that her grandfather died.”

Agatha heard the words, and her heart reproached her. How different was the cause of her sadness and abstraction from what Hester, and doubtless others, imagined! Her own affairs, her own perplexities, and her own faults, had driven from her mind nearly all remembrance of that sad time last year, which she had imagined would have been so painfully recalled as its anniversary approached.

Last Christmas eve! it was her grandfather's last on earth! she had passed it by his bedside, and a wailing wind had brought through the trees the sound of the church bells—bells not merry and joyous, giving forth a lively peal, but sounding at

solemn, measured intervals, according to a custom in that part of the country on the eve of a great festival.

She almost heard them now; she seemed again to see her grandfather's noble head, as, supported by pillows, raised on her arm, he strained his ears to catch for the last time the sound he had heard for so many years.

A summons to the supper-table roused her from her visions, and she tried to collect herself, and to offer thanks for the little gifts which she had received, and half of which she had not yet observed. But her words were cold and constrained, and those to whom she spoke felt chilled by her way of acknowledging a kindness.

Soon after supper the younger ones were sent to bed, and Agatha, saying she had a headache, retired at the same time.

"Poor girl! she is thinking of last year," said Mrs. Rivers, as the door closed behind her.

It was true now: Agatha *was* thinking of last year, though not exactly as Mrs. Rivers supposed; indeed, it would have been scarcely possible for one of her gentle nature to understand the tumult of thoughts which racked Agatha's brain. Her excuse of a headache was no mere excuse; her temples were throbbing and burning; the moment she reached her room she bathed them in ice-cold water, and then sat down to think—to think of herself as she had

been last year at this time and as she was now—to think of herself as she had been last night even, and as she was to-night; her self-respect gone for ever! and even the respect she still retained in the minds of others to vanish, perhaps, to-morrow, if she told Katharine the history of the letter. Not that Katharine would be likely to spread the story; but to know that one person was initiated into the secret of her fault—that one person would be always aware that she was not the honourable, well-principled being she appeared—would be shame and grief enough. She could not bear the idea of it: she could not tell, however much she might lament, her fault; she could not make the only atonement possible. And yet how was she to live with this burden upon her? How was she continually to bear her self-accusations in Katharine's presence, to shrink perpetually from every mark of her goodwill, conscious of the wrong she had done her? How could she endure to look back upon the past, to the friends she had loved, knowing how detestable the sin she had committed would have been to them; how lowering to the name of Marchmont—a name unstained by falsehood or treachery? Perhaps those friends could see her now; perhaps, so far as it was possible for blessed spirits to mourn, they now mourned over her fall, and longed for her to make amends.

And even if *they* could not behold her, Agatha

knew that one eye—the eye which never slumbers or sleeps—had seen her fault, and now witnessed her wavering between pride and repentance.

How could she kneel in prayer—how could she celebrate the morrow's festival—if she still persisted in her sin?

The thought was a serious one, and Agatha could not lightly cast it aside. She would tell Katharine all; she would give her the letter; she would be at peace again.

Peace? No, that could not return, when her self-complacency was destroyed. How could she in future ever express her high principles, or listen in silent disapproving contempt to any lower ones broached by others when Katharine was by—Katharine, who would know, or guess, all the weakness of her heart, her guilty deceit, her miserable jealousy, her unfounded fancy for one who was indifferent towards her. *Fancy!* Agatha could not now call it, or think of it, by a higher name.

Once more pride barred Agatha's heart against sacrificing so much to her conscientious scruples; then again better feelings roused those scruples with overpowering violence.

And so, amid these alternations of thought, utterly wearied out at length, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTMAS DAY AT THE GRANGE.

THE Christmas dinner at Meadow Grange would have gladdened the heart of a lover of old times. There was plenty even to superfluity on the table, and a total absence of new-fangled usages. The host was in his happiest mood; full of old stories and reminiscences, and ever ready for a joke with Fanny or the boys. Mrs. Thorpe was everything that was bright and beaming, and looked entirely in her element at the head of the hospitable board.

It was a family party, with only two exceptions: Mr. Manners, compassionately invited as a bachelor; and Tom Darnley, a youth recently articled to the firm of Rivers and Thorpe, upon whom Mrs. Thorpe had taken pity, when she found he was not going home for Christmas.

The clergyman of Coverdale was a standing addition to the Grange family party, for it generally happened that he was a bachelor, and, the Grange being in his parish, the Thorpes never lost an oppor-

tunity of paying him fitting attention. This was the second Christmas Mr. Manners had spent in the neighbourhood, and it was rumoured that it would be the last, the superior living which he had in prospect being likely soon to become vacant.

Katharine, who sat next him at dinner, listened anxiously to every word that fell from his lips, thinking that perhaps she might catch some scrap of information about Mr. Wentworth, but he did not once mention his name; and even when the railway smash was discussed, and some one, probably Mrs. James Thorpe, inquired whether it would make any difference to Mr. Wentworth, he simply said—

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Katharine, cousin Bessy asked you for a mince-pie,” said Mrs. Thorpe, and Katharine started from her rapt attention and endeavoured to enter into common things.

But Mr. Manners made amends for her negligence, and had placed the mince-pie on cousin Bessy’s plate before she had quite collected herself.

Happening to look ‘across the table at this moment, she was struck with the earnest way in which Agatha was regarding her, and yet more astonished that at her glance, Agatha cast down her eyes, and began to play confusedly with her fork and spoon. It was so unusual for Agatha to be discomposed by a look.

There were other things in Agatha’s demeanour

that might have puzzled Katharine had she continued to attend to her.

In truth, Agatha was most uncomfortable; in addition to her mental disquiet, she was now haunted by a sensation of nervousness, very foreign to her nature. She dreaded the very sound of Philip Thorpe's voice, and shrank from meeting his eye, fearing that in some unguarded moment he might allude to the letter he had found.

She was sitting between him and cousin Bessy, and to avoid the chance of being addressed by him, she directed an unusual amount of attention towards the latter, even trying to find subjects for small-talk; but there was no occasion to search long; having once started cousin Bessy, all she had to do was to listen, and offer occasionally an affirmative remark.

She felt herself thoroughly hypocritical whilst thus engaged, she was so unaccustomed to feign a sympathy she did not feel, and she had never learnt to consider such feigning as a first step towards reality. She despised herself, and acknowledged with bitterness that this was one more link in the chain of evils she had brought upon herself.

"What a sad thing this railway business is!" remarked cousin Bessy, having exhausted her last subject.

"Very sad, indeed," returned Agatha.

"I cannot understand the rights of it myself," con-

tinued cousin Bessy, "even after all the talk we have had about it; only it seems clear to me that Mr. Burton is a great villain. I always had misgivings, I must say, when I heard of all their grandeur. You remember, I dare say, Miss Marchmont, when Mrs. Oakenshaw was here in summer, that afternoon we all spent together in this house, and what an account she gave of them, and that poor girl they were bringing up in such pride and vanity. I pity her, I am sure, for she could not be to blame. All her fine friends will fall off now; it is the way of the world, Miss Agatha, you may depend upon it. I *did* hear a story about that young gentleman that was here in summer; some one said he was in love with his cousin, and, I dare say, it would be a good thing for her to have any one to look up to, but I don't believe in it myself. I should say his heart was free when he came here, whatever it might be when he left. That is to say, from all I heard, for I only met him once or twice," and cousin Bessy gave an intelligent look towards Katharine, to which Agatha, sorely against her inclination, responded by a smile.

It was indeed a changed state of things for Agatha to appear to understand such hints, but she felt instinctively that it was the safest way to avoid being suspected of jealousy after the conversation she had heard the preceding morning.

Two days ago, she would have been too proud to

use such a subterfuge, but since then her pride had sustained a severe shock.

“Oh, dear!” said cousin Bessy, “young people are all alike—I have not forgotten—but it is no use trying to help them. They must fight through their affairs as they can. Though I am an old maid myself, Miss Agatha, I like to see them come to a happy ending, as they do in books. That is where I find fault with the books though, they are not natural; all the people are finished off; now in real life, how many people are left unfinished? I mean, they don’t come to the ending you expect; but I dare say you don’t read novels, Miss Agatha?”

“Not many,” replied Agatha.

“Well, perhaps one might do something better,” said cousin Bessy, “but I must say, I like a novel to read sometimes. You know in my day young people did not learn so many things as they do now; no geology and science, and such like, and so we cannot amuse ourselves with learned books as you young ladies can.”

“I fancy young ladies read novels as much as ever they did,” said Agatha.

“Why, I suppose they do, except a few wise ones like you, Miss Agatha. At least, I know that Katharine Rivers, who has learnt more things with difficult names than I can mention, often brings me a story to read which she thinks pretty, and whether it is called a novel or not, does not much signify; it

all comes to the same thing. Now, I dare say, you'll call me a silly old maid for it, but I must confess there are few things I like better than to read an interesting tale, where the heroine has heaps of love-troubles, and gets safely through them all. It is not good to read too many though, for I never can leave one, and get to my work, when I am fairly interested in it. Now I wonder whether you ever find your geology, or whatever it is you read, so hard to leave?"

"I never have read any geology," said Agatha, "so I do not know how interesting it may be, but perhaps I may try it some day."

"I am glad to hear you say that, Miss Marchmont," said Philip Thorpe, who had caught the last words; "it will give you more interest in what I was speaking of the other day."

Agatha's speech had only been intended for cousin Bessy's ear, and she was a little vexed that it had reached Philip's. She had an intense dislike to appearing to yield any of her opinions or prejudices; and as Philip must have known from many a remark of hers that she undervalued his favourite study, she had no desire to make him aware of her relenting towards it. Besides, in her heart of hearts, a little bit of absurd pride of intellect made her shrink from appearing a beginner in any pursuit in which Philip was a master. She therefore answered, as coldly as possible—

“In the present state of things, a slight acquaintance with geology seems indispensable to enable one to understand other subjects.”

“And a slight acquaintance will never content you,” said Philip, pointedly.

“Goodness! why not, Philip?” asked cousin Bessy. “Do you think Miss Marchmont wants to wrap herself up as you do in those books you keep in the back-parlour closet, out of your mother’s way? I saw them all one day, full of pictures of coloured rocks, turned topsy-turvy, and thrusting themselves through different coloured ones—unlike anything I ever saw in nature. And then there were more books with steam-engines in them and balloons and inventions like what Mr. Davis used to show in the chemical lectures when I was a girl. You don’t suppose, Philip, that Miss Agatha is going to care for these things as you do, and where you got the taste is more than I can tell. Your poor uncle Richard, who was the only studious one in the family, used to keep his books, I remember, in that same closet; but his were mostly Greek and Latin ones, except some of English poetry, that I used to look into sometimes. The ‘Fairy Queen’ was one, I remember; I dare say your mother has them in the attics somewhere.”

“I only meant,” said Philip, addressing himself to Agatha, “that I do not think you would ever study anything without doing it thoroughly.”

Agatha made no reply, but she was struck with surprise that Philip should have hazarded a guess touching upon her character, and still more, that it should be one so near the truth.

“Philip,” called out his father, from the bottom of the table, “why don’t you fill Miss Agatha’s glass? We are all going to drink the Christmas toast; really, Annie,” he continued, turning to Mrs. Rivers, who was sitting next him, “Philip is getting more absent every day. I’m afraid Katharine has made sad work with his heart; the little monkey! what could she want better than Philip?”

“I don’t think Philip is thinking much of Katharine just now,” returned Mrs. Rivers; “he has something else in his head.”

“What, changed his love! you don’t mean—you cannot mean, Annie, that he is thinking of Miss Agatha there?”

“Of Agatha! oh, no,” said Mrs. Rivers, laughing; “I said some *thing*, not some *person*—I dare say my husband will tell you of it soon; at least, Philip is anxious that he should speak to you about it.”

“The glasses are all filled, uncle,” called out Henry Rivers, and Mr. Thorpe immediately proceeded to drink the Christmas toast, which simply consisted in each person’s drinking the health of every other person present, with wishes for a merry Christmas and happy new year, and many of them.

Shortly after this ceremony, rather a trying one for nervous people, the ladies retired to the drawing-room, and Agatha, somewhat weary of her conversation with Miss Bessy Thorpe, managed to escape from her.

Cousin Bessy almost immediately made a private signal to Katharine (she was very fond of small mysteries) that she wished to speak with her, and the signal being obeyed, the two withdrew to one of the windows, beyond the hearing of the group near the fire.

“I want to consult with you a little, my love,” commenced cousin Bessy. “You know, you all of you always come to drink tea with me in Christmas week, and you must tell me what day will suit you best: and about your sister, Miss Agatha, I have been rather puzzled. She has generally shown herself so unsociable that I scarcely liked to ask her, with the chance of being refused; but really, it seems to me she is improving so much that perhaps—do you think she would come?”

“Of course she would,” answered Katharine. “Agatha would not do a rude thing intentionally, and as she has gone with us to other places, she could not refuse your invitation.”

“But it is very disagreeable to think that people only come because they are obliged,” said cousin Bessy. “It is what I always say: if they don’t come willingly, let them stay away altogether.”

“Yes; it is disagreeable,” returned Katharine;

“but unfortunately it is what all people who give parties are exposed to.”

“And mine is not a party; at least, I have no amusement to offer you; however, perhaps it will suit Miss Agatha as well as anything gayer; and as I was saying, I think she is growing more sociable, and really she is a superior young woman, there is no doubt, and very good company when she likes. So perhaps she would not dislike coming so very much, Katharine?”

“I am quite sure she would like it as much as going to any other place in Fairfield,” said Katharine.

“Well, then, I will ask her,” said cousin Bessy; “but tell me, will Tuesday suit you as well as any other day? You see Phœbe has got a holiday to-morrow, and then there is Sunday; and Monday would be an——”

“All days are alike to us,” interrupted Katharine; “we have no engagements that I know of.”

“Well then, Tuesday,” said cousin Bessy.

Katharine smiled, and nodded an affirmative, but it must not be imagined that either she or cousin Bessy considered that an invitation and acceptance had been exchanged.

Katharine knew perfectly that the next morning, Phœbe, or Phœbe’s substitute, would carry about a set of little twisted notes to the intended guests; the

invitation couched in formal terms, and to be answered in the same manner.

Cousin Bessy enjoyed giving a party, and made the most of it. She now consulted Katharine on various points connected with the entertainment, and the subject was not exhausted when the gentlemen entered the room.

Philip and Mr. Manners were not amongst them; and Katharine before she turned from the window saw, with some surprise, that they were pacing along the garden walk, closely engaged in conversation. She had seen so little of Philip lately that she had not become aware of the fact, that he was much more intimate with Mr. Manners than he had been formerly.

“Really those two are getting quite friends,” observed cousin Bessy. “I am sure it is a good thing that Philip takes to a nice gentlemanly person like Mr. Manners, but I cannot think why they should choose to go and talk in the cold. It is getting quite dark now, and cannot be very pleasant out of doors, I should think.”

“It is a very mild Christmas day,” returned Katharine; “besides, if they have anything particular to talk about they would not mind the weather. But had we not better join the others at the fire? I know you want your tea, cousin Bessy. Look at Henrietta; how completely she is occupying those two boys, pretending to let them help her to make tea.”

“And making fun of them herself,” said cousin Bessy. “I have no patience with her flirting ways. I am sure it will be a wonder if the tea is fit to drink.”

“No fear of that,” said Katharine, laughing; “Henrietta is perfect in all such matters, and will not let her flirtations spoil her tea-making.”

Philip and Mr. Manners, meanwhile, were conversing with much earnestness. The former had been anxious and unsettled all day; he could not rest until something had been done about the iron-working scheme; he was impatient to lay his views before his father, and yet he thought it better for Mr. Rivers first to broach the subject. After the ladies retired, he asked him privately, whether he could not manage to introduce it in the course of conversation during the evening. But Mr. Rivers, not feeling Philip’s impatience, naturally enough objected.

This was Christmas night: Mr. Thorpe was in the full tide of enjoyment and cordiality; why disturb him by hints on a subject which was certain to cause him great annoyance?

“No, Philip; let us leave business to business days, and when we do bring it forward, let it be discussed in a business-like manner,” said Mr. Rivers; “would you spoil your father’s pleasure when he is happy in seeing his relations and friends about him, by hinting that a time will come when he will miss you from the circle?”

“No,” answered Philip; “I do not wish to make him more uncomfortable than is necessary, but as for missing me, even if I should settle at Greymore, I shall not be out of reach in these railway times, and I should take care not to be absent on an occasion like this.”

“But it takes some time to explain everything,” returned Mr. Rivers, “and I know enough of your father to be certain that at the first outset of the business he will seize upon the worst side of it, and look upon your going away as a regular parting, much the same as if you were going to India; and one must have plenty of time and opportunity for quiet talking, to make him see all the extenuating circumstances. Unless you are very unreasonable, you must see that to-night is not the time to enter upon such a discussion. I promise you that when I have a favourable opportunity, I will not fail you. Besides, I am interested as well as you, so you may trust me.”

Philip was not unreasonable enough to say any more; in fact, he acknowledged the truth of what Mr. Rivers said, but still he could not help feeling impatient, and his manner was restless and abstracted.

“Why, Philip, what is the matter with you?” exclaimed Mr. Manners, as they were leaving the room, and just as Philip had answered a question in a remarkably vague, unmeaning way, “one would

think you had some very important concern to settle in your mind."

"I have," returned Philip; "I have plenty to think about just now."

Mr. Manners looked in his face with some surprise; he was not inquisitive, but he was interested in Philip, and he could not resist the impulse to say, half jestingly—

"Can I be of any use to you, and help you to think out your thoughts?"

And Philip, like most reserved people, when once they have begun to give confidence, was glad to be questioned.

"Let us have a turn in the garden, and I will tell you something about it," he said.

Hence the appearance of the two on the garden walk, which had excited the surprise of Katharine and cousin Bessy.

Philip did not detail his plans to Mr. Manners; he merely told him that a way seemed opening before him to enter upon the kind of life he was most anxious to lead, but that he knew his father would strongly object to it, and he dreaded putting himself at once into such decided opposition to all the home projects and wishes about him. Mr. Manners had for some time been aware how completely distasteful to Philip life at the Grange had become, so there was no occasion to dilate on that part of the subject.

“And this new project is one which you are sure will suit you?” he said, inquiringly, when Philip had finished speaking.

“Yes,” said Philip; “it is connected with the things which most interest me, and one cannot live without something to interest.”

“Still, I am doubtful,” said Mr. Manners, “whether we ought not to find our interest in what lies closest to us.”

“But are people to have no preferences?” asked Philip. “Suppose your friends had chosen to make a merchant of you when you wished to be a clergyman, how should you have felt? Would you not have clutched at any way that offered itself of carrying out your schemes, not theirs?”

“Perhaps I should,” said Mr. Manners, “but that would not make it right or wise.”

“At this rate the world would stand still,” said Philip; “if all kept exactly to the course laid before them, no one would rise, and very few would have their real powers exercised.”

“I don’t quite agree with you there,” said Mr. Manners; “but there is much to be said on your side of the question, and I am willing to allow that, in many cases, it is advisable to seize upon a chance which may arise of placing ourselves in a position suited to our powers; always, indeed, when it does not interfere with a present duty.”

“You think it is a clear duty for me to stay and

help my father to manage his land," said Philip, in a rather piqued tone, "a business I know nothing about, and which he is fully able to manage himself. If he were old or infirm it would be different; but there is really nothing left for me to do, at least nothing that could not be easily done by another person."

"I have often wondered lately," said Mr. Manners, more as if in continuation to his own thoughts than in answer to Philip, "how it is, that with your tastes, you do not take more interest in agriculture; farming is now, in many places, conducted on scientific principles, and you might find scope for employing your knowledge of geology, and chemistry, and engineering, in the improvement of your land."

Philip laughed.

"That shows how little you know my father. Would he ever bear the idea of turning the Grange into a model farm? You should hear him abuse Mr. Mechi, and such speculating individuals. No, no; to change his method of farming would be far worse than to take myself away altogether. In the present case I shall vex him and shock his prejudices; but when he sees me happy, and useful, and successful, as I hope to be, he will be reconciled. The other would annoy him and irritate him every day of his life."

"I can see some truth in that," said Mr. Manners. "I might have remembered that Mr. Thorpe in-

veterately stands by the old method in all things; and, as you say, a man like him, still in the prime of life, does not require your assistance."

"I am a hindrance rather than a help to him," said Philip; "he would never gain any satisfaction from teaching me farming, or trying to make me a sportsman. Depend upon it, he would regret in the end that he had not left me to work out a way of life for myself; and as for help, if he should really want it, there is Charles Rivers, whose whole thoughts turn upon farming and shooting. He might have him for a pupil and a future help to him. I have thought of this all the time, but I dare not mention it to my uncle Rivers at present, for it might be a good thing for Charles if my father took him under his hands; and if once my uncle got into his head that any advantage would come to himself from giving way to my plans, it would be all up with his speaking of me as I wish him. I know how particular he is, and some notion of being influenced by self-interest would come in the way."

"Well, I am inclined upon the whole to think you are right in trying to build your fortune, or, at least, to follow the bent of your powers. It is certain they do not lie in the direction your father wishes, and even if you managed matters satisfactorily in essentials, you could never enter fully into his amusements. Charles Rivers would, I dare say, prove a better sporting companion. It is odd you should

have so few of the tastes of a country gentleman. Why, half the lads one knows would be delighted at the prospects of such a life as you might lead."

"I know they would," said Philip; "and I don't dislike all country pursuits myself. Riding, for instance, you know I like; few things give me more satisfaction than to scour the country far and near, and tame a spirited horse; to conquer him and yet make him like me. There seems something worth doing in that, but I cannot see the glory of hunting a fox, or bringing down partridges and pheasants."

"I don't think such pursuits are intellectual enough for you," said Mr. Manners.

Philip reddened.

"There is no need for such satire," said he, quickly. "I never set up for having much intellect. I was all but a dunce at school; and I have no head for nice distinctions and definitions, and the sort of thing that intellectual people delight in. I could find as much pleasure in shooting partridges as in disputing for two or three hours about the origin of a word, or the exact meaning of some Greek or Latin verse, as I have heard you and—and Mr. Wentworth do."

"You may be as intellectual as either of us for all that," said Mr. Manners, "and your intellect may be of more use to you. But what do you say to returning to the house? We should not withdraw

the light of our presence from the assembled company on a Christmas night; and, to say the truth, I shall not find the sight of the yule log unpleasant."

"Is it cold?" said Philip, and he turned round and accompanied Mr. Manners to the house.

There was a good deal of talking and laughing round the fire that evening; not so loud, however, as to drown the noise of more uproarious merriment, which penetrated from another quarter of the house. Once or twice Mrs. Thorpe considered it her duty to say, that really she must go and put a stop to such a tremendous noise in the kitchen, but everybody said, "Oh, no! let them enjoy themselves," and no further steps were taken.

It was the custom for the farm-labourers to be entertained with bread and cheese and ale, in the Grange kitchen on the evening of Christmas day; there were also several female retainers who had tea and cake with the maids; the party, therefore, was rather large, and could not fail to be somewhat noisy.

Fanny and the younger boys had vanished from the drawing-room some time ago, attracted by the prospects of seeing some fun in the kitchen, and the former now rushed suddenly into the room, announcing to her uncle that Joe Morris, the veteran of the party, was singing such a funny song, and that he was going to make a speech, proposing the

master's and mistress's health, and would uncle Thorpe come and hear him?

"We should make Joe what he calls *narrows*, I am afraid," said Mr. Thorpe; "but we will go by and by when the speech is over, if everybody is inclined," he added, looking round.

"It is what is always done at the Grange on Christmas day," said cousin Bessy, in an explanatory tone to Agatha, who happened to be near her. "We always go and see the servants and labourers enjoying themselves, and wish them a merry Christmas. They like it."

"Yes," said Agatha; "it is very natural."

She thought so; and it was a sort of thing to which she had no objection; she had been accustomed to it at Greymore on a more exalted scale. She had been in the habit of showing herself in company with her grandfather and aunt to the assembled tenants and dependants in the large hall, of granting patronage and receiving homage. So when the time came she followed the rest to the great farm kitchen.

What a kitchen it was! Not, indeed, imposing in effect like the servants' hall at Greymore, with its carved oak settles, its massive tables, its vaulted entrance, its wide, antique hearth, and sounding pavement; but a bright, cheerful, comfortable place, with the ruddiest of fires piled high with cracking logs, the floor smooth and nicely sanded; the clean,

whitewashed walls gleaming with household utensils, polished and scrubbed till they reflected back the glow of the fire like so many vessels of gold and silver.

And what plenty was there! from the magnificent hams and sides of bacon hanging from the rafters, to the substantial cheeses and piled-up loaves and cakes on the long table, and the foaming jug of ale carried about, and continually replenished by a bouncing Hebe or a dairy-maid; all spoke of rustic prosperity and abundance. And yet, of course, these were "bad times for farmers!"

The appearance of the host in the doorway followed by his guests, produced different effects upon the different members of the assembly. Some who were young and comparatively strangers shrank into the background, bashful, and uncertain what was expected of them; others, who had experienced many Christmas meetings, came boldly forward to offer their good wishes to the master and mistress. Amongst these, the veteran Joe distinguished himself, adding various remarks about the younger branches of the Thorpe family, hoping that they might prove worthy of the old stock, and intermingling some witticisms and compliments regarding the fairer portion of the community.

These were all received in good part, and Fanny then attacked Joe on the subject of his favourite song, saying that she was sure every one would be pleased

to hear it, if only he would sing it again. Joe objected at first, pleading his *nervousness* before such a company; but at length, encouraged by the whispered flatteries of the bouncing young dairy-maid, who seemed to consider it her duty and privilege to keep up a flirtation with the merry old man, he yielded, and commenced, in a quavering voice, which had still some tune in it, an old-world song, of which a Chloe was the heroine.

Agatha, who, after her first glance at a scene, which differed, in not a few respects, from the Christmas entertainments at which she had previously "assisted," had retired behind the doorway, now found herself addressed by Philip.

She had avoided him all the evening with a nameless fear, which was, however, unnecessary, as until now, under cover of Joe's song, he had not attempted to speak to her.

"I can give you your letter now," he said; "only come a little farther down the passage."

Agatha complied; and, not choosing to be observed by the rest, she walked quite to the end of the passage, which was not the one by which she had entered the kitchen, but which led past the dairy, and opened, she found, into the dial-garden. The door was half open, and in the doorway she waited till Philip came up.

The letter was in his hand, and he gave it into hers without remark. There was a new moon, and

the stars were bright, and by the faint light Agatha could see that the envelope was greatly soiled, but whether the address was still distinct she could not discern.

“How did you guess this was mine?” she asked, curious to know if Philip was aware who was the real owner of the letter.

“I was in the hill-fields above the road,” said Philip, “and I saw you seeking very earnestly for something under and about the bridge. You seemed anxious, and I hurried on, thinking I could help you, but you had left the place before I came up. I poked about amongst the wet stones and thorns as you had done, but could not find anything. I fancied you had lost a brooch or a bracelet, or something of that sort, and at first I did not notice a bit of paper sticking in the wood-work which juts out from the bridge, on one side of the stream. Just as I was leaving, I happened to see it, and pulled it out. Finding it was a letter, I was sure it was what you had lost, though, as you will see, the direction has been smeared and washed away. It had been blown over the railings I suppose, and caught on a spike of the wood.”

“I wonder I did not see it,” said Agatha.

“It was hidden by some thorns which I had cleared away in my search,” said Philip, “besides being partly in the mud and water. I could just make out ‘Miss’ on the cover, but of course, as you had been

looking for something, I concluded I had discovered the right thing."

"It is the letter I lost," said Agatha; then, with some hesitation, she added, "I thank you for your trouble. Perhaps you thought my behaviour odd last night, but I shall feel—feel obliged to you if you will not——"

Oh, Agatha, Agatha! to be reduced to speak in this way to Philip Thorpe!

"You may be sure I shall never notice anything you wish unnoticed," he answered, rather proudly; "at least I need not be suspected of *that*. My business was to give you your letter, and I have done it."

Agatha felt strangely humiliated, and an unaccountable respect for Philip stole over her. He had advanced through the doorway, and was now standing in the open air. As she glanced at his tall, massive figure, more erect than usual, his head thrown back and the faint moonbeams illuminating his stern, square brow, and showing an unusual light in his eyes, a conviction of his powerful nature shot through her, as it had done once before on the day of the Brakely fête.

She felt that here was a will, against which, when it was really excited, it would be vain for others to struggle—a self-sufficing spirit that would carve out its own path through all obstacles—and she wondered how it was that Katharine's affection had not been

won, or *vanquished*, by a nature so much more forcible than her own.

A moment later, she could have smiled at her awed feeling, as Philip, in his ordinary tone, proposed that they should return to the rest of the party. Joe's song was over, and his audience already dispersed: Agatha and Philip re-entered the drawing-room with the last stragglers.

The rest of the evening was, to Agatha, like a dream; she heard people talk, and even tried to talk herself more than usual, from a dread of being suspected to have anything on her mind, and yet, all the time, she was carrying on a train of thought, wholly different from anything she heard or said.

That unfortunate letter! it was for ever before her eyes, and the question, what to do with it, ever before her conscience.

Conscience, indeed, gave one prompt and decided answer, "Deliver it immediately to Katharine, and relate the history of its loss, simply and truly."

But though convinced in her heart that this was the right course, Agatha could not resolve to pursue it.

Consequences rose up before her—Katharine's suspicions, Katharine's conclusions, Katharine's lessened respect for her.

Agatha knew that she did not easily win love, she even fancied that she hardly cared to win it; but she believed that she was respected, and respect she

could not bear to lose. To own that she had told a falsehood! to confess the mean paltry reasons that had influenced her, or, at any rate, to suffer them to be guessed! A deed, apparently so motiveless, would make Katharine search for some secret motive, and to know that she suspected it, would be worse even than to make a confession. How could she bear it? What should she do?

The time for departure arrived, and Agatha's mind was still in uncertainty. It happened that she and Katharine were together on the way home; they were in the back seat of the pony-carriage, which Henry was driving; Fanny sat beside her brother, and kept up an incessant flow of talk.

Katharine was very quiet; she had been cheerful, almost gay, during the day, but now she seemed tired, and Agatha had noticed, as they were standing in the hall before starting, that she was pale, and had a worn, sad look.

Agatha's conscience smote her; perhaps Katharine really did care for Mr. Wentworth—perhaps *that letter* would bring her peace and happiness, should she give it.

Henry and Fanny were too busy talking and laughing to observe anything; she could easily give it, perhaps in the darkness more easily than at any other time. Yes, she would give it. She did not say—Courage! to herself, for she did not like to think herself cowardly. She did not seek a higher

strength to help her weakness, but she said to herself, "*I will* do it."

The letter was in her pocket, she grasped it with her hand, its touch seemed to burn her, yet for one moment she waited. In that moment Katharine spoke.

"Do you know, Henry, that there is to be a Hunt Ball at Kinsford, on the 17th or 18th? Henrietta heard it from the Simpsons; she is going with them, and we think, perhaps, mamma will take us: won't you like to go?"

"It is such a long way to go," said Henry, with affected indifference.

"Oh, nonsense," returned Katharine; "we could take a fly, and go easily, and coming back in the morning we should sleep all the way. I don't think mamma will object, because she will see Mrs. Simpson, and they used to be friends when they were young; besides, she likes us to have a little amusement at Christmas. I know you are wishing to go all the time, Henry."

The conversation continued for some minutes in the same strain. Here was Katharine talking lightly and looking forward to balls! What had become of all her sadness?

Agatha felt half angry, half relieved: she withdrew her hand from her pocket. How was it possible to give the letter, now that Katharine was talking to Henry?

Presently, however, Henry's attention was claimed by Fanny, and Katharine was again silent.

The poor girl had only talked because she felt herself sinking into selfish cares, and she had roused herself to give Henry a piece of news in which she thought he would be interested. If she talked lightly and seemed eager for pleasure, it was only from the effort to be like her usual self: in reality, she cared as little for the Hunt Ball just then as Agatha did.

But Agatha could not understand this, and she weakly suffered her conduct to be guided by impulse. She was influenced by the possible effects her behaviour might have upon another, not by the strict rule of right, as regarded herself.

The letter was still in her possession when she went to bed that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PARTY AT COUSIN BESSY'S.—PHILIP'S PLANS.

TUESDAY, the twenty-ninth of December, was a busy day in cousin Bessy's household, and Phœbe was kept in a state of continual activity. A fragrant, spicy smell of cake-baking pervaded the kitchen, and unwonted consignments of cream and other delicacies were made at the street-door.

The preserve closet was unlocked, and small jars of various shapes found their way to the kitchen dresser; the best china was taken out, carefully dusted by cousin Bessy's own hands, and placed on the back-parlour table. As the day advanced, the best sitting-room assumed an unusual appearance of decoration; the pieces of drugget were taken up and stowed away in a closet; fresh anti-macassars were hung on the chairs; the worsted-work footstools were uncovered, and sundry small articles of ornament, too precious for daily view, took the place of cousin Bessy's work-basket and scattered paraphernalia on the centre table.

A pack of cards and a book of riddles reposed side

by side on the round stand in the corner, and a box of Chinese puzzles, and Mrs. Elsley's backgammon board, always borrowed on occasions of this kind, were conspicuously brought forward, indicating that the amusement of the expected guests was in some degree provided for.

About the middle of the afternoon, four candlesticks, containing Palmer's best "patents with plaited wicks" made their appearance, each candle being adorned with a sort of frill, or star-shaped ornament of green waxed paper.

Two of these were placed on the centre table, the other two, after being moved away to various positions to try the effect, were at length stationed upon the chimney-piece, where, at any rate, they would illumine the portrait of cousin Bessy's political hero, Sir Robert Peel.

Towards dark, a middle-aged woman, who brought, wrapt in her apron, an antique affair made with frills, and ornamented with worked-net strings, which she called her cap, walked in by the back entrance, and was immediately treated to a preliminary view of all the festal arrangements.

She had in former days been for a long time in Miss Thorpe's service, and had only left it to be married to a man to whom she had been engaged for fourteen years.

Being so constant in large matters, it is no wonder that she was so in small ones, and clung to a de-

parted fashion in caps, but there was another reason for wearing this particular one. Katharine Rivers, when a very little girl, had shown a decided inclination for fancy-work in preference to stitching, which inclination had chiefly developed itself in working cap-borders and strings, after some old-fashioned plan, in glazed cotton upon net; and these were usually bestowed upon the servants of her acquaintance.

When Ann Hodgson had married, she had been presented with a cap-border and strings of unusually elaborate design; and though repeated washings had worn away the borders, the strings yet remained, and being placed upon a cap as like the original construction as possible, were always exhibited when there was a chance of meeting Katharine.

The visitors did not arrive at a fashionable hour, yet for some time before the first knock was heard at the door, cousin Bessy was seated by the bright fire, in her shot-silk gown and cap with rose-coloured ribbons, a much more modern affair than Ann Hodgson's; and with a spill in her hand, ready to light the candles on the first alarm.

The Hazel Bank party came at the appointed time, but the hostess did not, as on less formal occasions, run out to meet them: the girls were ushered upstairs by Phœbe with smiling ceremony, to take off their bonnets, and the boys found their way to the sitting-room.

Cousin Bessy had not ventured to invite Henry to tea, but he and his colleague, young Darnley, were to look in during the evening. Philip Thorpe had promised to come for Henrietta, and the two young Elsleys were also to come in time for a game at cards. The tea-party, with the exception of Charlie and Willie Rivers, consisted entirely of young ladies; a formidable array! including, besides the Rivers' family, Henrietta Brooke, Lucy Grover, who had arrived at Fairfield the day before, and a young niece of Mrs. Elsley's, who was spending the holidays with her. Soon after the guests assembled, tea was brought in; matters were not arranged in the homely old fashion which prevailed at the Grange parties: no table was spread with dainties, and resplendent with the shining tea-equipage, to tempt the visitors to seat themselves near it. Cousin Bessy had a great idea of gentility, and she adopted another plan. Tea was made in the back parlour, and then handed round by Ann Hodgson, who was followed by Phœbe, bearing the tray with muffins, cakes, &c. Charlie and Willie Rivers, who, though they enjoyed the round game at cards, generally found the early part of these entertainments rather dull, would have preferred the Grange mode of drinking tea; when the demolition of bread and butter and marmalade would have furnished them some employment, but the unremitting attentions of Phœbe rendered their regrets

almost superfluous; and the trying to make her laugh, and the witnessing her convulsive efforts behind the door to compose her features, afforded them some amusement.

Cousin Bessy was not unaware of the sad attempts that were made to upset the gravity of her attendant, but the comprehensive reflection, that "boys will be boys," excused everything. As for the rest of the party, talking was, of course, sufficient amusement for them.

The young Miss Elsley was the most silent of the set; she was about Caroline's age, but much less grown-up in manner and opinion, and rather inclined to be afraid of that precocious young lady, so the two did not "get on" so well as cousin Bessy had intended; but Miss Elsley, when she did talk at all, only ventured upon shy remarks to Fanny.

Agatha, for a wonder, took a fair share in the conversation; not that her spirits were gayer than usual, but from the same motive which had influenced her on Christmas day—a dread of seeming pre-occupied; and also, perhaps, to escape a little from her own thoughts. For Agatha still kept Katharine's letter. She had not seized upon an opportunity of delivering it, though doubtless she might have found one, and every day was making more difficult that confession, which was difficult enough in the first instance.

One grand topic of conversation was, of course,

Arabella Grover's engagement; and cousin Bessy, with her usual eagerness about love matters, was anxious to hear the whole history of it from Lucy, having, however, occasional distractions when Phœbe did not hand the cakes at the proper time, or appeared to have a too keen appreciation of the boys' jokes.

Lucy was quite as eager to talk as any one could be to listen, and expatiated largely on Dr. Harley's merits, and his attachment to Arabella, and even to the whole family.

"But how did it begin, my dear?" asked cousin Bessy; "you have not known Dr. Harley long."

"No; he only came to Marston last May, after old Mr. Beckwith died; just when Arabella and I were staying here with Sophia; and you know, as we have no gentleman to call upon new gentlemen when they come, we did not know him at first, and we always happened to miss him at other places, though the Hammonds used to rave about him, but nothing was going on then ——"

"Well, but where did Arabella first meet him?" asked Miss Brooke, trying to keep Lucy to the point.

"Oh, she had often seen him, you know, at church, and riding past, but she had not spoken to him; and it was so odd—she got a bad cold one day, and though it was warm weather mamma was afraid of her lungs, so she sent to Dr. Harley."

“But Mr. Gray used to be your doctor, surely?” said cousin Bessy, who had been nodding her head two or three times towards Agatha, by way of intimating to Phoebe that it was time to hand the tray to her.

“Yes; that is what makes it so odd,” returned Lucy. “Mr. Gray had just gone away for a few days, such an unusual thing for him, and mamma had no confidence in the assistant; besides, he is an impertinent young man rather, and used to try to join us coming from church on Sunday evenings, and he had sent Arabella a valentine—at least, we knew it came from him—and mamma did not much approve of him; his father was quite a common person at Newborough.”

“Arabella seems attractive to the profession,” remarked Henrietta; “so your mamma sent for Dr. Harley?”

“Yes; and he came, and Arabella was not feeling at all well; and she was lying on the sofa, I remember as well as possible, in her pink muslin dress, and because of her chest she had put on her purple velvet jacket, and her hair was very nicely done, and it is my firm belief that the moment Dr. Harley entered the room he was struck with her.”

“Dear me!” said cousin Bessy, highly interested in these details, though Arabella was not a great favourite with her; “and what did Arabella think of him?”

“Oh, she would not say, but Eliza Hammond and I saw at once that it was a case. Eliza was rather vexed at first, I think, for she used to fancy he admired her, but she soon came round, and was quite interested in watching things.”

“Is he handsome?” asked Caroline.

“Well, not exactly what I call handsome,” said Lucy, “but interesting. He is tall and pale, but his eyes are not good; one cannot tell what colour they are; and he wears spectacles, and he has no whiskers, but he has beautiful curly hair, and he is, oh! so gentlemanly, and so devoted.”

“And besides his profession he has money, I understand,” said Henrietta.

“Oh, yes; quite an independent property; I don’t know how much, but a very good thing; and such a delightful family they seem to be.”

“Oh! you know the family then,” said Katharine.

“No, not exactly; but they have written such letters; I mean his mother and sisters; his father is dead, you know. One of them is staying with him now, such a sweet-looking girl!”

“Where do they live?” asked Agatha, by way of saying something.

“At Cheltenham,” said Lucy; “there are three girls, and a son at college.”

“It will be a nice place for you and Emma to stay at,” said Henrietta. “I suppose they will ask you.”

"Oh, yes; we are great friends already with Selina: is it not a pretty name? And Dr. Harley has such a pretty name too—Algernon. George Algernon is his real name, but Arabella always calls him Algernon; she is going to have Mrs. G. Algernon Harley on her cards."

"But that will look so American," said Katharine; "you must persuade her not to do that."

"The Americans generally put the initials last, I think," said Agatha.

"Do they? Well, I don't like it either way," said Katharine.

"And I don't call Algernon such a very pretty name," said Hester.

"Jealousy, jealousy!" exclaimed Henrietta, laughing. "You see, Lucy, they are beginning to find fault with the poor man's name; envious of Arabella's Algernon! you must tell her."

"Indeed, I don't think Katharine and Hester would be so silly as to care about a name," said Fanny, interrupting her talk with Miss Elsley to jerk in her little word amongst her elders.

Cousin Bessy laughed.

"No, my dear; I don't think they would; but Algernon is a very pretty name, for all that. But what's a name? Dear me, there is some poetry about that; what is it, Katharine? You know everything."

“‘A rose would smell as sweet,’” began Katharine.

“Ah, yes; that is it. But, Lucy, you have not told us when the wedding is to be.”

“Oh, really, that is scarcely settled yet, Miss Thorpe. There is nothing to wait for, so I suppose it will be some time in spring. I should like them to wait till June; one can have a much prettier wedding in summer than in winter, you know.”

Lucy was proceeding with expectations and anticipations, but cousin Bessy, happening to catch Phoebe in an attitude of intense attention to the conversation, was suddenly seized with a panic at the idea of all this confidential talk having been carried on in her presence; though it was not in reality of much importance, as in all probability cousin Bessy would have imparted the substance of it to her next day. However, traditional observances must not be disregarded, and cousin Bessy, with one of her mysterious glances and nods, tried to stop Lucy, and, failing in that, said, in a low voice—

“The servants, my dear; I had forgotten till now.”

“So had I,” said Lucy, aloud, “but it does not signify; it is no secret.”

“Lucy, do you think you shall go to the Kinsford ball?” said Katharine, to make a diversion.

“No, I think not. Sophia did talk of it, but she

says now it would be too much trouble. It is such a long way, and no railway ; are any of you going ? ”

“ Yes, Hester and I ; and mamma is actually going to take us, and Henry of course will go.”

“ Your mother going to a ball thirteen or fourteen miles off ! ” exclaimed cousin Bessy ; “ well, wonders never cease.”

“ I don’t think she would have gone if it had not been for the Simpsons. Mrs. Simpson wrote and pressed us to go, and said she would give us beds, and as mamma has not seen her for a long time, or any of the Kinsford people she used to know, she has agreed to go.”

“ Are the Simpsons relations of yours ? ” asked Agatha.

“ They are connected in some way with us ; Mrs. Simpson’s mother was a Thorpe, I believe ; was she not, cousin Bessy ? you understand all these relationships better than I do.”

Cousin Bessy, whose mind was now relieved by the final disappearance of her handmaidens, began to explain to Agatha, who of course cared nothing about the matter, the genealogy of the Simpson family ; but she was soon interrupted by the questions Lucy was asking about the dresses Katharine and Hester meant to wear at the ball. She, like the rest of the party, was interested in the answer.

Katharine simply described the dresses.

“ You will look very nice,” remarked Henrietta

Brooke; "it is quite proper for Hester to be all in white at her first ball."

It may be noticed in passing, that Henrietta herself never favoured any one with a preliminary description of any dress in which she intended to appear; she liked to burst in unexpected splendour upon the sight, and also to prevent the possibility of imitation.

"And are you going to this ball, Miss Brooke?" asked cousin Bessy.

"Yes; I am going to stay a few days with the Simpsons at the time."

"There will be quite a house full," said cousin Bessy. "How will they manage, I wonder?"

"We shall be there such a short time that we can be put anywhere," said Hester; "we are going ready dressed for the ball, and we shall only rest for a few hours afterwards, and then come home."

"It is much the best to get home as soon as one can," said Katharine; "the Simpsons know so many people in the neighbourhood, that their house will be all confusion next day; stragglers coming in, who have stayed all night in the town."

"I thought you liked seeing people, Katharine," said Agatha.

"Yes, I do, but I don't like a confused medley; people running in and out all day. I know what it will be like exactly; you will come in for it all, Henrietta."

"It will not disturb me," said Henrietta; "I never

get up till the afternoon the day after a ball, and all these straggling people you anticipate, Katharine, will have started for their homes by that time."

"One looks such a fright after dancing all night," said Lucy, simply. "I think you are quite right not to show yourself. Don't you remember, Katharine, at the bachelors' ball here last year, that Miss Allen from Rudby who was thought so pretty, and some gentlemen loitered about the White Hart yard the next morning to see her drive away, and they declared she was quite ugly by daylight. Oh, indeed, one must be something extraordinary to bear looking at after sitting up all night."

"Really, Lucy, I did not give you credit for such deep policy," said Henrietta, laughing, and turning the policy from her own shoulders to Lucy's.

"Oh, as for me, I don't care much," said Lucy; "it is only people who look particularly well at night who need mind."

"If a person has real beauty," remarked Agatha, "I do not think a little extra paleness, or weariness of expression, can be very hurtful."

"No, indeed," said cousin Bessy, "and you are all of you talking nonsense about not being fit to be seen, as if you were a set of old women. Now there is Hester here, I would bet a fourpenny-piece she will look as fresh the morning after the Kinsford ball, as if she had been in her bed all night; at least, fresh enough for anything."

Hester blushed, and Lucy muttered, "Perhaps Hester might."

"Well now, but I can tell you a bit of news about this ball," said cousin Bessy; "you will see a new young gentleman there, and a very grand one, I can tell you."

"I know whom you mean, cousin Bessy," said Katharine, "young Mr. Merivale of Somerford. He came of age the other day, I know, and there were rejoicings at Somerford, and I dare say he will go to the ball, for he has property at Kinsford; indeed, the Queen's Head belongs to him, so he must encourage a ball held at the house."

"How do you know so much about his property, Katharine?" asked Henrietta.

"Only because papa is his lawyer," answered Katharine, "and I heard him talking about the property the other day, and mentioning houses in both Fairfield and Kinsford which formed part of it. Somerford is about half way between the two places."

"Is the house an old one?" inquired Agatha.

"No, not very," said Katharine; "I think Mr. Merivale's father built it, and he bought the greater part of the estate, though the Merivales had always some land at Somerford. They are a good family, Agatha," she added, smiling.

"Much too good for a partner like him to be any good to girls like us," said Henrietta. "He is one of

the sort who are introduced to you at a ball, and with whom you dance once, or perhaps twice, if you are passable, and then you don't meet again till next year at another ball, and go through the same again. It is not easy to get intimate with such people, so he will be no acquisition to the Fairfield society, Miss Thorpe."

"One can never tell what will be," said cousin Bessy, sagely; "but you have not heard what I had to say. You know, Phoebe comes from Somerford, and her mother used to be dairy-maid at the Court, so whenever anything is going on there, she and her husband have a share in it. They dined at the servants' dinner on Christmas day, and as Phoebe went home the next day, she heard all the news. She says they all speak well of young Mr. Merivale, and he is a very handsome young man; the old folks say, like what his father was. Phoebe saw him herself, for her mother sent her to the Court to take back a dish which the housekeeper had given her the day before with some cold plum-pudding in it for the children, and he was just going out, so she caught a sight of him in the hall."

"But how does she know that he is going to the ball?" asked Henrietta.

"The housekeeper told her, and she had heard Mr. Merivale and Mr. Percival speak about it. Mr. Percival is his cousin, and a very clever barrister, I hear: he was one of young Merivale's guardians,

though he is only a young man himself. Not handsome, Phœbe says, but sharp-looking, as if nothing could escape him."

"And is Mr. Merivale so very handsome, cousin Bessy?" asked Caroline.

"I think he must be from Phœbe's account, but she uses odd words, and I don't believe she knows the right meaning of them. She says he is tall, with a beautiful, slim figure; and he has dark eyes, and dark brown hair, rather curly, but not a dark complexion, and no whiskers, and a clear white brow, with such an innocent look."

"Innocent!" exclaimed Henrietta; "I don't like the sound of that for a man."

"That is one of Phœbe's queer expressions," said cousin Bessy; "but I don't think she means what you do by innocent. She does not mean simple-looking at all events, for she said his eyes looked clear into you, though not so sharp as Mr. Percival's."

"She must have made good use of her own eyes, I think," said Katharine, "to see so much in a short time."

Here a further discussion of Mr. Merivale's looks was prevented by the fidgety manœuvres of the boys, who, having exhausted all the amusement to be obtained from the Chinese puzzles and the Book of Riddles, had become anxious for a game at cards, and cousin Bessy, on ascertaining their wishes, was

too good-natured not to agree immediately, though perhaps she, as well as some of the elder girls, would have preferred a little longer gossip.

The choice of a game was now a matter of some difficulty; the boys only knew Commerce and Pope Joan, and Lucy Grover had only played at Loo and Vingt-un. Miss Elsley was totally ignorant of cards, and Agatha had never played at a round game in her life. Cousin Bessy and the others knew a little of everything; Henrietta declaring that she forgot all games till she commenced playing again, so that all were alike to her.

Ultimately, Commerce was decided upon, cousin Bessy being of opinion that it was better to defer Pope Joan till the arrival of the gentlemen, when it would be more amusing. She undertook to instruct Miss Elsley, greatly to the perplexity of that poor girl, who was soon lost in a maze of Prials and Sequences, and bewildered by the difference between Lives and Graces, cousin Bessy's explanations being none of the clearest, and always supposing some previous knowledge.

However, the game was only the merrier for the mistakes. Agatha having consented to play, it was with her a matter of course to pay sufficient attention to the game to learn its few simple rules, and she mastered them so readily as to excite the astonishment of Lucy Grover, who declared that she must be wonderfully quick at cards.

The entrance of some of the young men who were expected caused a diversion, and the game was changed to Pope Joan, to the great enjoyment of cousin Bessy, who delighted in the excitement of wondering who would get matrimony at the end.

Afterwards they played at Old Maid, or Old Bachelor, at which there was, of course, much cheating, and also great ridicule of Philip Thorpe, who always omitted to pair his cards at the proper time, and was indeed, in Fanny's estimation, hopelessly stupid at any kind of game.

Hester proved the one who was to be first married, and Lucy Grover, in spite of many manœuvres, and to her great consternation, was to be the old maid; but cousin Bessy consoled her by saying, that, as there had been so much cheating, the oracle was not worth believing.

Then cousin Bessy told some of the girls their fortunes, whilst the others were playing at "Consequences," and by this time it was getting late, and some one spoke of going home.

Upon this, the bell was rung, and in obedience to the summons, Ann Hodgson and Phœbe appeared with trays of cake and wine, and all the delicacies which cousin Bessy and her attendant had been able to manufacture; the grand feature of the entertainment being a porcupine trifle, in which were concealed a ring and a sixpence, and of which every one was expected to partake. Either by

chance, or some cheatery on the part of Henry Rivers, who had taken the post of Master of the Ceremonies, the ring fell to the share of the hostess; but she insisted upon its being replaced in the dish, and now, by a strange turn of destiny, Fanny was the one to get it. Lucy Grover escaped the sixpence, which was gained by one of the boys.

After prolonged leave-takings, and much wrapping up of the girls on the part of Ann Hodgson, the party separated, cousin Bessy thanking all of them for the pleasure they had given her, and they, most of them, feeling that the pleasure had been mutual.

The Hazel Bank family walked home, and Philip was driving Henrietta in his dog-cart, so they parted at the door. Philip, in shaking hands with Agatha, contrived to say,

“It is to be settled to-night.”

Agatha started: whenever Philip addressed her now, her thoughts turned to the fatal letter, and his connection with it. She could not help imagining that he knew the truth, and her first idea was that his whispered sentence had something to do with it. She said nothing in return, and a few minutes afterwards the real meaning of his speech flashed across her. He was, of course, referring to the business connected with working the iron at Greymore, so important to both of them, but which in the absorbed state of her mind she had almost forgotten. It had, however, been rarely absent

from Philip's thoughts during the evening, and might perhaps account for his more than usual stupidity at cards.

Mr. and Mrs. Rivers, during the absence of the younger members of the family, were to spend a cosy evening at the Grange, and Mr. Rivers had promised Philip to enter upon the question which so deeply interested him.

A favourable opportunity for doing so took place soon after tea. Mr. Thorpe liked to smoke a pipe in the evening, and Mr. Rivers had no objection to a cigar, so the two withdrew into a small apartment, sacred to farming discussions and tobacco smoke, and left the ladies to their domestic gossip. It was some time before Mr. Rivers managed to lead round the conversation to the subject he desired: but at length he succeeded, and told the whole story of Philip's discovery; of the great advantage to be gained therefrom, both to Agatha herself, and to any one who would join her in the undertaking contemplated; and in conclusion, he mentioned Philip's desire to have the management of the affair.

Mr. Thorpe listened in silence to the end, being in truth too much astonished to speak. When he did, it was merely to utter, in an accent of mingled surprise and incredulity the word,

“ Philip ! ”

“ Yes, Philip,” repeated Mr. Rivers, “ the idea

seems to astonish you much more than it did me. I had long been aware that Philip wished for a more exciting life than he leads here."

"It is Katharine's doing," said Mr. Thorpe; "the lad is disappointed, and wants to get out of the way for a time. I don't mind letting him have a few months in London, or anywhere he likes, to get over it; but going away like this upon a wild-goose chase after a business he knows nothing about, is a thing I never will consent to."

"You are a little mistaken in Philip, I think," said Mr. Rivers; "as for Katharine, I really don't think she and Philip would suit each other, and I dare say he will now find that out. He may be rather sore about the affair just now, though I am sure he does not show it much; but his wish to leave the Grange depends more upon his own tastes and character than upon anything concerning Katharine."

"But what does he know about iron mines, let me ask you? Why on earth does he fix upon a business of this kind? If he wanted to try a profession, and did not think farming gentlemanly enough, I might be vexed, but I could see some reason in it. But this! a mining, speculating concern, fit for nothing but swallowing up capital! I wonder at you, Henry Rivers, for encouraging such a scheme."

"If I thought the undertaking would be ruinous,

or fruitless even, is it likely I should advise my daughter to enter upon it? Remember, Agatha's risk will be greater than Philip's. As for capital, there are ways of raising it without applying to Philip, or rather to you, for it. We might form a joint-stock company, and carry out the plan in a much more extensive way than we now propose. The thing I was most anxious about was Philip's management."

"Don't be angry, Rivers; I do not mind risking a little money, and, whatever you do, keep clear of joint-stock companies. They end mostly in swindling and ruin. Make the concern a private one if you can, by all means. But what I care about is Philip's going away. The notion quite staggers me, and I have no faith in his management, as you have. What in the world he knows about such things, I cannot conceive."

"I did not know until lately," said Mr. Rivers, "that he had any acquaintance with the subject; but, from conversations I have had with him, I am now convinced that, from his scientific knowledge, his practical turn for applying his knowledge, and his fondness for geology and engineering, he——"

"Geology! engineering!" exclaimed Mr. Thorpe; "I know he reads such books sometimes, but as to anything he knows in that line helping him in the business you speak of, I cannot understand it."

"Not only his knowledge, but his eagerness for

improvements of a practical nature, his interest in the progress of railways, and so on."

Mr. Thorpe groaned.

"Where can he have picked up such notions?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Rivers, with a smile; "he has not learnt them from you, certainly; but, you know, one does sometimes see sons who hold opinions directly opposite to those of their parents. Be thankful that yours has not struck out a new line for himself in religion or morals, but only in tastes, and possibly in politics."

"Philip knows nothing of politics," said Mr. Thorpe.

"Not much, I dare say, but the opinions he holds on other subjects will influence him if ever he studies them."

"Well, Rivers, do you want to make me angry that you tell me all this?"

"No," answered Mr. Rivers, "but only to make you see how hopeless it is to set yourself against the stream, and to expect to make a young man of Philip's views and peculiar talents happy or useful in the life he leads here."

"He is not much use, certainly," said Mr. Thorpe, "and he cares for nothing that it would be natural for him to like. But, then, this business! I cannot believe he understands it. Philip has not much head for business so far as I can see, and he was not

clever at school, I know. Why does he set up for——?”

“What are you saying about Philip?” interrupted Mrs. Thorpe, who, with Mrs. Rivers, just then entered the room.

Though she rigorously prohibited smoking in every other part of the house, she had no invincible objection to the smell of tobacco, and as often as not, sat with her husband when he smoked his pipe.

Mr. Thorpe began to explain, and Mr. and Mrs. Rivers exchanged looks of intelligence.

Mrs. Thorpe was just as incredulous as her husband about Philip's fitness to superintend mining operations or iron-works; and she, like him, exclaimed that Philip was not clever.

“I would not say a word against him for the world, I am sure,” she said; “Philip is as good a boy as ever breathed, and he has common sense, at least I thought so till now; but it requires a long head to understand such concerns as you talk about, and Philip is not quick at understanding things. When his father and Mr. Middleton have been talking together and having arguments, I have heard him put the most stupid questions, as if he could not make out what they meant; and they have been obliged to explain a thing over and over again to him, which very likely I have seen myself from the beginning.”

“Philip is absent,” said Mrs. Rivers; “I am not

surprised at his asking foolish questions, because, perhaps, he had not been attending to what had been said before. But when he is really interested, I firmly believe Philip is by no means wanting in either sense or cleverness."

"He has a clear, sound intellect," said Mr. Rivers, "and a strong powerful judgment, but not much ease, I believe, in directing his talents to different subjects. If you can once engage his attention and rouse a taste in him for any given study, he will never rest till he has mastered everything connected with it. This is Mr. Manners' opinion as well as mine, and he has seen a good deal of Philip lately. And as for the particular bent of his powers, I can only tell you that Mr. Saunders, when he was here, said that Philip was a first-rate engineer wasted."

"You both of you seem to have a great idea of Philip's cleverness," said Mrs. Thorpe, rather petulantly; "I wonder you did not contrive to make Katharine value him a little more. I think if she had been my daughter, I should have tried to use my influence."

"I could have wished Katharine to like him," said Mr. Rivers; "but on such a point, I would be very guarded about using any influence. Katharine could not see Philip's good qualities, and she is a young girl, she prefers more brilliant ones. And I dare say she expects sympathy in her music and poetry and girlish fancies, which she would not get from

Philip. He is too much of a *man* for her present taste."

"Oh, Henry, Katharine's tastes are not frivolous, I am sure, and she does not like effeminate characters," expostulated Mrs. Rivers.

"Well, she is a good girl, and clever enough in her way," said Mr. Rivers; "but I don't see why we are talking about her in this manner. She has nothing to do with the present question."

"Indeed, I think she has a great deal to do with it," said Mrs. Thorpe; "she disappointed Philip, and I must say did not behave quite well to him, and that is why he wants to go and leave us."

"There we differ, as I have already explained," said Mr. Rivers, "but, at any rate, let us leave that part of the subject.

And he now proceeded to give more detailed information about the mining plan, and its probable advantages, not necessary to be entered upon here.

It was by no means an easy matter to change Mr. Thorpe's views as to what was a desirable mode of life for his son, and Mr. Rivers almost despaired of being able to conquer his prejudices, yet he did not like to leave the subject without gaining something with which to animate Philip's hopes. The argument which had most weight with Mr. Thorpe was that his son's absence from the Grange need not be considered a permanent one: it might be looked upon merely as a trial; if it did not answer, and Philip repented of

his choice, he could always return to the Grange, and the experiment would not disqualify him for the life he might be expected to lead there in future years, when he might be called upon to fill his father's place ; only, let him have the chance of being happy in his own way.

“ Suppose one of your sons wished to go to sea ; what should you do ? ” asked Mr. Thorpe, after listening to Mr. Rivers for some time.

“ I should let him go,” said Mr. Rivers ; “ very probably, he would find the reality of a sailor's life very different to his idea of it, and would be satisfied to return and enter into a profession of my choosing ; whereas, if I thwarted him, he might, perhaps, turn out fit for nothing, and spend his time in lamenting his hard fate.”

“ And you, Annie, what should you say to such a thing ? ” asked Mrs. Thorpe, turning to Mrs. Rivers.

“ I should, no doubt, find it a great trial,” she answered, “ but I think I should see that Henry's course was right.”

“ You are both of you far too indulgent,” said Mrs. Thorpe ; “ indeed, children are not kept in order now-a-days as they used to be.”

Mr. and Mrs. Rivers could not help smiling : they wondered how many times Philip's will had been crossed, before the present moment, when an important decision was to be made !

Mr. Thorpe remained in silent meditation for a

long time ; at last, just as the sound of wheels announced the approach of Philip and Henrietta, he said to Mr. Rivers :

“I will follow your judgment because I believe you know what you are about, Rivers ; but it is a hard thing to see all one’s plans thrown to the ground. However, the lad shall have his whim ; we will talk about the ways and means to-morrow.”

Poor Mrs. Thorpe felt very cross. She thought her husband very foolish in yielding, and she spoke pettishly to Henrietta, when, on entering the room, she made some remark about the evening they had spent at cousin Bessy’s.

Mr. and Mrs. Rivers knew that the crossness would not last long, and did not appear to notice the stiff manner she used towards them when they rose to take leave.

Still, she was shocked that they should go without having had supper, which in the excitement of conversation had been forgotten. As it was on the table in the adjoining room, she insisted upon their sitting down and having some, and there was nothing for it but to comply.

Philip soon perceived, from the constrained manner of the whole party, that the important discussion had taken place ; but, as no one alluded to it, he did not venture to do so himself, particularly as Henrietta Brooke was present, and he never cared to make her acquainted with his private affairs. He had offered

to drive home his aunt and uncle in the dog-cart, and, being impatient to learn the result of the conference, he reminded them, somewhat inhospitably, that the horse had not been taken out since he drove up with Henrietta, and that it was a cold night.

Hasty leave-takings were now exchanged, and in a few more minutes Philip knew his fate. He was not very exultant, for he was aware that he was causing a great sacrifice to his father; and, though convinced that he was doing right, he was anxious for the time to arrive when he could prove he had not been mistaken, and success would weaken the prejudices which were opposed to his will.

He thanked Mr. Rivers quietly and gravely, and very little was said by any one during the drive.

Mr. Rivers, on arriving at home, would have told Agatha at once of Mr. Thorpe's decision, but she had gone to bed.

Katharine, who was still in the drawing-room, said that she had complained of being tired and having a headache, and had gone up-stairs as soon as they had reached the house.

"It is a pity the pony-carriage was not sent for you," said Mrs. Rivers; "but you all agreed that you would rather walk."

"I don't think the walking tired Agatha," said Katharine; "it was more likely the talking and playing at cards."

“She exerted herself to be agreeable more than usual,” said Henry; “I never heard her talk so much, and I dare say such an uncommon effort was enough to knock her up.”

“Have patience only,” said Mr. Rivers, “and you will find her quite merry in time.”

Both Katharine and Henry smiled rather incredulously, as they took up their bedroom candles and said, “Good-night !”

CHAPTER IX.

TO CONFESS OR NOT?

It was the day of the Kinsford ball: the new dresses which had been ordered from London in honour of Hester's first ball had been punctually sent, and had given satisfaction; nevertheless, Katharine and Hester paid frequent visits to their room to be sure that everything was in order, and that nothing would be found wanting at the last moment.

Agatha, at another time, might have smiled at their anxiety; but, at present, it was a relief to her to find that Katharine could be interested about a ball, and she did not know that Katharine was thinking far more of Hester's dress, and her brilliant first appearance in a ball-room, than of any pleasure in store for herself.

Since the evening of cousin Bessy's party, Agatha's thoughts had been perforce diverted from their usual channel by considerations concerning her property, which her father was frequently bringing before her. Arrangements had to be made for taking into her own hands the portion of land where the

iron-stone had been discovered, and which might be supposed to be impregnated with the ore; and then there were other arrangements to be settled between Philip and herself.

Mr. Thorpe, having once consented that Philip should have anything to do with the affair, was not backward in advancing money to further it; Agatha's little capital was to be applied to the same purpose, and, together with the assistance Mr. Rivers could grant, a sufficient sum was raised to enable them to commence operations on a small scale, which could be gradually increased, according to the success they gained.

The opinion of Mr. Saunders, who was consulted on the matter, entirely coincided with that which Philip had first expressed, and all parties concerned felt justified in indulging sanguine anticipations as to the result of the undertaking.

The thought of being able to redeem the Grey-more lands in a few years, though it did not bring to Agatha's mind the satisfaction it would once have done, yet engaged her attention to some degree, and prevented her from dwelling perpetually upon the still unsettled question of her behaviour about Katharine's letter.

Nearly a month had passed since it had been returned to her by Philip, and she still kept it in her possession, and her unconfessed fault still remained a burden upon her conscience. The relief of actual

business could not last for ever, and on this day of the ball, when her father was at his office, and Philip's departure for Greymore prevented all chance of seeing him, and the members of the household were all occupied with their own affairs, Agatha's private perplexities and troubles fell upon her with renewed weight.

Katharine certainly ought to have her letter, even if she did not care for Mr. Wentworth; no frivolity or indifference on her part could really alter Agatha's clear duty to confess, and as far as possible atone for what she had done. So much, in the solitude of her own room, she could not forbear admitting; but when it came to the test—when she fixed upon a time to speak to Katharine—when she imagined the words she would use—when she pictured to herself Katharine's astonishment and disapproval, perhaps her contempt—her courage failed her, and she tried to cheat her conscience with vain excuses.

At length an idea struck her: she would write instead of speaking; she should avoid in this way witnessing the effect the disclosure would have upon Katharine, and also not run the risk of betraying any weakness which might still further lower her self-esteem.

The task of writing was a more difficult one than she had anticipated; many an unfinished sheet of paper did Agatha tear up during the afternoon, and it was only when it was growing dark, and she was

expecting every moment to be summoned to tea, that she managed to write to the end of her narrative. This time she wrote with a sort of desperation, fast and boldly, not pausing to choose her words.

Hardly daring to glance at what she had written, she folded the paper, withdrew the important letter from the secret drawer of her desk, and enclosed the two in a large envelope, which she directed simply, "Katharine."

This packet she intended to place in some drawer or box, where Katharine would be sure to find it during the absence of the sisters this evening.

The announcement "Tea-time, tea-time," in Fanny's voice on the stairs was heard just as Agatha had accomplished her task, and, hastily putting the packet in her desk, which she locked, she left the room and went down-stairs.

There was only a small party at the tea-table: the girls, as they had to start early for the ball on account of the distance, were already dressing; Mrs. Rivers was fidgety and restless from the unwonted excitement of going from home, and after drinking a cup of tea vanished from the room; Caroline, who was making tea, was evidently wishing to be upstairs superintending her sisters' toilette; and Fanny was constantly running about with messages.

Henry was not in the house; he had gone on a bouquet-hunting expedition; and the younger boys alone philosophically drew their chairs to the table,

and commenced an attack upon the buttered toast and muffins.

“They don’t want any tea,” said Fanny, returning from one of her excursions; “Hester’s face is quite hot already, and she says tea will only make it hotter and redder; and I don’t think Katharine has time to drink any, she is doing Hester’s hair, oh! so beautifully; a large Grecian plait, you know, Caroline, to go all round her head; when she gets the white roses at the back, she will look quite lovely.”

“Silly girls!” said Mr. Rivers, looking up from his newspaper; “when they are half way to Kinsford this cold night, they will wish themselves back at the fire with a cup of warm tea before them.”

“I say, they don’t know what good Scotch bread we have to-night, or they would find their way downstairs,” said little Willie.

“At any rate, they might eat something,” said Caroline; “here, Fanny, you can take this plate of toast up-stairs; but I don’t wonder at Hester, I’m sure; if I were going to a ball, I should lose my appetite.”

“They’ll be jolly hungry at supper time,” said Willie; “wouldn’t it be fun to be there amongst the cold chickens and tarts and jellies?”

“You greedy boy,” said Caroline, “do you think people who go to balls care about the supper? But it is no use talking to you. Agatha, will you have some more tea?”

“No, thank you,” returned Agatha.

“Then, as papa has finished tea, I will go up-stairs and see what they are doing. Mind you ring the bell, boys, when you have eaten as much Scotch bread as you want, and, Agatha, please don’t let them touch the urn, they always make such a mess of the tray and the table-cloth.”

Caroline withdrew, and Agatha took up a book and pretended to read. She did not like to go to her own room, as she knew she would be expected to take leave of the ball-goers, and, with the rest, to inspect their costumes.

Presently Henry came in with some bouquets, which he delivered into Agatha’s charge, as she was the only one of his sisters in the room. He hurried away to dress, for, in spite of the indifference he had displayed when the ball was first mentioned, he was, in reality, the most eager of the party about it.

When he had gone, silence reigned in the room. Mr. Rivers read his paper, and Agatha turned over the leaves of her book. But it was no use trying to fix her attention; she could think of nothing but the letter, and her own confession: she tried to remember the words she had written, and to imagine the impression they would make upon Katharine; she actually trembled before the idea of the judgment of this girl, whom she had always considered so inferior to herself.

It would be terrible to fall so deeply in her estimation, to lose so utterly all claim to respect, to prove

herself so untrue to the principles she professed. And yet, much as she dreaded the moment of disclosure, she longed for it to arrive; she shrank from the long night of suspense before her, yet she did not fear that her own resolution would fail. She was sufficiently humbled to own that she had been weak; not sufficiently humbled to be afraid of future weakness.

The minutes passed slowly by; at length Mr. Rivers took out his watch and declared that it was time for the ball-going people to start. Fanny was despatched on another of her errands upstairs to hurry them, and to announce that the fly was already at the door.

Mrs. Rivers speedily made her appearance, shawled for departure, but she must submit to display herself in her festive attire to the scrutinizing eyes of papa and the children.

“I say, mamma will look as well as the best of them,” was Willie’s immediate sentence, whilst Fanny went into raptures over the pretty head-dress, half cap, half flowers, which allowed her mamma’s still luxuriant hair to be more visible than was usual. Mrs. Rivers positively blushed under her children’s praises, and Agatha could not help thinking that there was a great charm about her step-mother’s simplicity and freshness of feeling, which gave to her matronly bloom something of the attraction of

early youth, though it did not detract from her lady-like, sober serenity of manner.

More messages were sent upstairs before Katharine and Hester, or even Henry, appeared ; but at last a “silken rustling” announced the approach of the girls, as, slowly and carefully, they descended the stairs in all their grandeur.

The whole party rushed into the hall to see them ; the tall housemaid was following them, holding a candle high above their heads, and Caroline, who had preceded them downstairs, carried another, so, together with the usual hall light, they were fully illuminated.

They both looked nice enough to justify the praises of the family and the ecstasies of the servants, who, as well as cousin Bessy’s Phœbe and Hannah’s mother, and Ann Hodgson, had assembled at the kitchen door to see the sight, though doubtless, in a crowded ball-room, compared and contrasted with others, their appearance would be much less striking. Both wore white dresses of simple transparent material over rich, glistening silk. Hester’s costume was completed by white roses and lilies of the valley, and flowers of the same kind were arranged in her hair. Katharine, to mark, as she said, her greater age, and to show that she was a young lady already out, wore coloured flowers—rich crimson roses and falling sprays of graceful fuchsia.

Both were young and fresh and lady-like, but Hester undoubtedly outshone Katharine in real prettiness; indeed, in the full glow of mingled pleasure and timidity, and half consciousness of looking her very best, she might almost be considered beautiful.

The observers at the kitchen door agreed that she would be the belle; the only doubtful one being Ann Hodgson, who declared that though Miss Hester was very pretty, Miss Rivers had a very taking way, and she really could not say which, &c. As for Henry, though a good-looking youth enough, he excited far less attention than his sisters: doubtless, however, his time would come, and admiration which he would value far more than that of cousin Bessy's Phœbe, or Hannah's mother, would fall to his share. He was the first to hurry the party off to the carriage.

Luckily it was a dry frosty night, so the white satin shoes passed scatheless over the door-steps and gravel walk. The adjustment of crinoline occupied a little time, and then, followed by adieus and good wishes, the carriage drove away.

Agatha took one of the lighted bedroom candles from the passage table, and went to her own room. Her admiration of her sisters had been silent, but her examination scrutinizing, so far at least as Katharine was concerned; she was anxious to discover what were her real feelings about going to this ball.

One little incident had made her redouble her attention. Mr. Rivers, on having Katharine's pretty wreath pointed out to him by Fanny, had said,—

“Yes, red flowers suit Katharine; I remember hearing some one say so, one day in summer, when you had been decking yourselves with flowers.”

“It was Mr. Wentworth,” said Caroline; “I recollect, because mamma was rather provoked with him for gathering her finest *Géant des Batailles* rose.”

Agatha fixed her eyes on Katharine's face; she saw a pleasant blush pass across it; this little reminiscence seemed to brighten her into a bloom and beauty almost equal to Hester's.

It was clear, then, that she still believed Mr. Wentworth cared for her; otherwise, Agatha argued from her own feelings, such a remembrance would only have aroused painful thoughts. Whether the blush and the pleasure proceeded from gratified vanity or from real affection, she could not determine. But it was no matter, she ought to give Katharine her letter, and she had made up her mind to do it.

She opened her desk, took out the packet, and stood listening near the door, to be sure that no one was in her sister's room. For some time she had to wait, as the shutting of drawers and boxes proclaimed that the room was being made tidy after the important toilette which had taken place there; but

at length a step, which Agatha knew to be that of the tall housemaid, passed the door and descended the stairs, and this part of the house was left to quietness.

With a stealthy tread, very unlike her ordinary one, Agatha proceeded to her destination: she had already, from her recollection of some of Katharine's arrangements, decided where to place the letter.

There was a little table or stand on Katharine's side of the room on which stood a few books, and a box where she kept her ribbons; the box had no lock, but Agatha knew, from some joking which she had heard between the sisters, that Katharine had a great objection to having her ribbons, &c., interfered with, and that it was an understood rule, though jestingly enforced, that the box should not be touched without her permission.

Still stealthily advancing, Agatha reached the stand, and opened the box: she could almost hear her heart beat, as she removed one or two of Katharine's gay bows, and placed the packet under them.

A strange place truly for the document she had written—a confession which had cost so much shame and grief, about which so many evil thoughts and passions had hovered, to find a resting-place in that treasury of poor Katharine's harmless vanities!

Something of incongruity struck Agatha, at the moment she deposited the papers, and the half-

hysterical sensation which often accompanies highly-wrought emotion attacked her. She could not suppress a laugh, and the sound of it, strange and hollow, almost frightened her; and, hastily closing the box, she left the room and returned to her own.

Miserable, restless thoughts attended her; she felt no satisfaction, no cleared conscience, from what she had done; nothing but anxiety as to what Katharine would think, what Katharine would say; how it would be possible to bear the conviction that Katharine in future must consider her professions hypocritical, her vaunted principles but empty sounds—a sure sign, if she had but examined herself, that no true repentance had guided her conduct, and that even in her apparent humiliation her heart was not really humbled.

To escape from her wretched thoughts she went downstairs and joined the party in the drawing-room. The boys and Fanny were playing at bagatelle; Caroline, endeavouring to console herself for being too young to go to a ball, by reading an account of one in a novel; and Mr. Rivers still occupied with *The Times*. Agatha, to the great surprise of the bagatelle players, offered to join them. The boys, finding she played well, and with seeming spirit, almost decided that she might turn out “a brick” of a sister after all, and Fanny whispered to Caroline that Agatha was growing quite good-

natured. They little suspected her real thoughts and motives.

From legitimate sorrow she had never sought distraction; it might be indulged openly; but from restless cares, unsubdued self-reproach, and bitter anticipations, any kind of temporary relief was welcome; even the knocking about of bagatelle balls, and listening to boyish jokes.

Supper was earlier than usual, and soon afterwards the boys and Fanny, who had been allowed to sit up for it, went off to bed. Caroline, who might have stayed longer had she liked, chose to accompany Fanny, preferring probably to finish her novel upstairs to forming part of a dull trio below. Agatha at first was half inclined to follow her example, but, recollecting that her father would be rather ungraciously left alone, she remained.

As the door closed upon the others, he drew a chair for her nearer to the fire and to himself, and with an odd, awkward feeling, she sat down; it was so new for her to be left *tête-à-tête* with her father. A short time ago she would have enjoyed the prospect, but at present she could not enjoy anything. What would he think of her if he knew how she had acted?

Mr. Rivers seemed disposed to be talkative and communicative; he recurred to the subject of the iron discovery, and the plans for the Greymore estate, and Agatha could not help being interested

in hearing of the possibility, nay, of the very strong probability, of being able to restore the greater part of the property in the course of a few years, and of once more living in the old house.

“I am as pleased as you can be, Agatha, at the prospect of restoring the property,” said Mr. Rivers; “but I cannot enter into your feelings about living at Greymore, and I do not believe, when the time comes, you will like to shut yourself up in the gloomy old place. After living in a family, you would not take to living alone; indeed, it would make any one smile to hear of such an idea from a girl like you. Surely, until you marry, your father’s house is your natural home.”

“I shall never marry,” said Agatha.

“I will not vex you by telling you that is what all young ladies say, for I don’t think you say it with the same meaning as they do. I believe you really think it now, but it is possible you may change. And even if not, how can you look forward to spending your days in a dreary solitude, when you have relations and friends only too happy to receive you?”

“My happiest days were passed at Greymore,” said Agatha, bluntly, “and there I should at least have the remembrance of former happiness undisturbed.”

“But why not have happiness itself instead of the memory of it?” said Mr. Rivers, with some

suppressed annoyance in his tone; "at your age, Agatha, it is a gloomy view of life to think of living on remembrances. I had hoped that by this time you would have been happier with us, and that I should not still have to regret giving you up as I did to your grandfather. It was a great mistake to loosen all natural ties, even for the strongest consideration."

"Do you regret it?" said Agatha, with an accent of surprise; "but surely my grandfather had some claim upon me?"

"Not enough to justify an estrangement from your father."

"I am not estranged from you, papa," said Agatha, with some effort; "I have always loved you, and you have so many others, you can scarcely have missed *me*."

Mr. Rivers looked pained.

"You are my first-born child, Agatha, the child of my youth. Cannot you understand that my love for the others will never lessen my love for you?"

"But I belong to a forgotten period," said Agatha; "when another fills my mother's place, how——"

"Stop, Agatha," said Mr. Rivers; "I will not hear another word of this kind. I loved your mother most fondly, and truly lamented her; but when another source of happiness arose before me, was I

to resist it, and close my heart obstinately against consolation at the very outset of life? You may believe me when I say that, fortunate as I have been in my second, my *wiser* marriage I must call it, I have never ceased to think tenderly of my early love, and that you, who seem the connecting link between me and the past, are as dear to me, and always have been as dear to me, as my other children."

"Thank you, papa," said Agatha, in a low voice; "I believe you love me."

Mr. Rivers did not speak for a few minutes; then he said, in a lighter tone,—

"But, Agatha, since you and I love each other, why can you not try to be happier? why not extend your affection to your brothers and sisters?"

Agatha did not answer.

"I hoped that you were growing more affectionate and more reconciled to our ways," continued her father; "but, as you still talk of leaving us, I must have been mistaken."

"It is difficult to accustom oneself to changes," said Agatha. "Perhaps I feel more affection than I show; and I cannot easily fall into ways so unlike my own."

"I can understand that you find it difficult to enter into the amusements of the younger ones; you have not been used to a house full of children; but surely, Katharine and Hester might be companions

for you. I once had an idea, soon after you came, that you and Katharine would have been great friends; I thought that her frankness was breaking down your reserve, but afterwards your intimacy seemed to die away, and now I think you and Hester are more likely to get on well together."

"Katharine and I have so little in common," said Agatha; "I cannot enter into her occupations and pleasures, and I am sure that she does not understand me."

"Do not be too sure of that," said Mr. Rivers. "Katharine, at any rate, gives you credit for all the good that is in you, and I suppose you will not quarrel with people for not understanding your faults."

"Katharine has, perhaps, a sort of esteem for me," said Agatha, thinking sadly how soon that respect might cease.

"She has more than esteem for you, Agatha; she has always been the one to stand up for you, and she has maintained that even your gloomy reserve and indifference proceeded from the steadiness of your nature. She saw, as I see, that you have great and good qualities hidden under your repelling manner, and she said, from the first, that your love, once gained, might be always depended upon. She gives you credit for great depth and solidity, a high sense of duty, and perfect truth and sincerity. That is not a character you can find fault with."

“And do you believe all this of me, papa?” asked Agatha, shading her face from the fire with a newspaper she had taken up. Oh, that she could have hidden her face from all the world! Oh, the shame of hearing these false praises of her goodness and truth!

“I do, indeed, my child,” said Mr. Rivers. “I believe you have great faults, but also great virtues, and I only want to see you give these last fair play.”

Courage, Agatha; tell your father all; prove, that though you have failed grievously, you have still some nobleness left in you. Confess past faults, and start fresh, and strive to merit the praises now so undeserved.

Something like this Agatha said to herself; but pride and self-confidence had choked up the springs of moral courage, and it would not arise at her bidding. She could only say, in the stereotyped words of false humility,—

“You both overrate me, I am afraid.”

“No; *I* do not,” said Mr. Rivers. “I see you have serious faults, but so have all strong characters, and yours, Agatha, I believe to be strong for good or evil.”

Agatha could not reply. She shaded her face still more carefully, and at length, saying the fire was too hot, she pushed her chair farther back.

Her father misunderstood her manner; he knew

she was proud and self-reliant, and he imagined she was offended at the shadow of blame, when, in reality, she was mortified by praise. He thought her silence indicated coldness and annoyance, and he felt, as the rest of the family had done, chilled by her impenetrability. If she had frankly owned herself faulty, begged him to point out her particular failings, and asked his guidance, his heart would have warmed more and more towards her, and even the recital of her late sad error would have been met by more pity than reproach. Agatha was not quite insensible to this, but her unsubdued heart could not bear the idea of pity. She could not brook the thought of being deemed weak—she, who had appeared so strong! She was torn by contending emotions; she longed for the relief of sympathy and forgiveness; yet she rebelled against the submission and humility necessary to obtain it. Mr. Rivers, finding she made no attempt to prolong the conversation, looked at his watch and said it was time to go to bed.

Agatha rose deliberately, put away her newspaper, and lighted her candle; then she went up to her father, and said “good-night,” with her usual cold kiss,—not a sign of emotion or affection on her calm countenance, not an indication that a conversation of more than ordinary interest had taken place!

Mr. Rivers followed her with his eyes as she left the room, and then turned to the fire with another

sigh of regret that he had suffered her to grow up far away from him, and from healthful family ties.

When Agatha reached her own room, and had closed the door, she sat down to consider every word her father had said. She was especially struck by his mention of Katharine's high opinion of her, and she imagined with pain and shame what that opinion would become to-morrow. She brooded over all the consequences that might ensue from the reading of the letter and the confession, till she worked herself into an agony. For the first time the idea occurred to her that not only Katharine, but others, would become aware of how she acted: she did not suspect that Katharine would needlessly betray her, but still, when she had read the letter (which Agatha had all along concluded to be a proposal), would she not consult her father about it? and would not he discover from the date that there had been some delay in its delivery? and then, too, if Katharine wrote to Mr. Wentworth, would she not be obliged to account for having left the letter so long unanswered? *He* would thus learn something of the meanness of which she had been guilty, and perhaps guess the rest. Even if Katharine did not tell him the whole history at once, would it always remain a secret between them?

Oh, that Agatha could have restrained her imagination, and remained satisfied with doing her duty,

without anticipating results ! But she thought, and thought, until her brain seemed to whirl. She tried to remember the exact words she had written to Katharine, and wondered whether she had made her confession as little compromising to her dignity as was consistent with truth. She could not recall the whole of it, she had written it so hurriedly, and yet she could not sleep whilst she remained in uncertainty.

The house was very still now. Caroline and Fanny, whose room adjoined Katharine's, were likely to sleep soundly ; she knew that her own movements were noiseless, and she had only a short distance to traverse.

Once more, therefore, she crept from her own room to her sister's, opened the little box and took out the packet. She durst not remain on the spot to read it, she felt so guilty and cowardly, hating herself all the time for feeling so.

Replacing the ribbons and shutting the box, she stole back to her own room with the papers.

She almost trembled as she broke the seal ; a warning though unheeded voice seemed to tell her that the seal, once broken, would never be renewed ; that the confession, once read over by herself, would never be read by another, never be re-written. She went through it ; she fancied her father reading it ; she imagined Mr. Wentworth hearing the details of it, insisting perhaps upon knowing them, and she pic-

tured to herself the anger and disappointment of the one, the astonishment and contempt of the other.

She could not stoop to ask Katharine to keep her secret, nor could she find words to soften what she had written into something fit to meet the eyes of her father and Mr. Wentworth. On the same principle that she had answered Katharine's question about the letters by a direct falsehood instead of by an equivocation, she now felt that if she made any confession at all, it must be the direct truth.

She was as little tempted to gloze over her act with excusatory words, as she was to break the seal of a letter which she could yet treacherously keep. Long she sat and looked at its half-obliterated address, of which, however, she could trace enough to distinguish the well-known handwriting. No tinge of tenderness mingled with her sensations as she regarded it. Whatever weak liking she had indulged for the writer had vanished almost from the moment when she had, for, as she fancied, his sake, committed a contemptible fault: she could still dread his scorn, but she no longer cared to miss his love. She could have borne now to witness his devotion to Katharine, but she could not have borne the consciousness that he knew her weakness.

She was not sufficiently acquainted with her own heart to be aware that not affection for him, but morbid self-esteem and dislike of ridicule, had prompted her conduct, and that the roots of her error lay far

deeper in her nature than any feeling concerning him—far, far back beyond the date of her first meeting him.

Is there any need to relate the close of Agatha's musings that night, to say that the paper she had written was torn into fragments, the letter once more locked in her desk, and the time of its delivery to Katharine indefinitely postponed?

CHAPTER X.

THE OPENING OF A NEW ROMANCE.

THE ball-goers did not return from Kinsford so early as was expected on the following day. Dinner, though delayed for an hour, passed without their appearance, and it was only as the bleak, cold afternoon was closing in, that the fly drove up to the door.

They all looked rather different from what they had done in their ball-robcs on the previous evening; the winter merino dresses and dark bonnets were not half so becoming as aerial gauze and wreathed flowers; or perhaps it was the raw, chilly air which made their faces look so blue and pale.

The blazing drawing-room fire, however, soon made a little improvement in the complexions of the party, and they were glad to wait there for the tea which had been promptly ordered, whilst Fanny assiduously carried away bonnets and wrappers.

It was rather difficult to reply to the numerous questions that were made; but all the answers agreed

in the main point, that the ball had been a very enjoyable one.

Dancing had been kept up to a late hour, and mamma and Mrs. Simpson had been most indulgent chaperones, staying nearly to the last dance. Of course it had been impossible to get up very early, and they had delayed their departure so long that they had been persuaded to stay dinner at the Simpsons'.

"And did you dance a great deal?" inquired Caroline. "Hester was afraid that she should not have many partners."

"Oh, Hester might have danced every time," said Katharine; "but sometimes it was too crowded to dance with any pleasure."

"And who was the belle?" pursued Caroline.

"I heard several named," said Katharine; "there were different opinions."

"I think now-a-days," said Mrs. Rivers, "there never is any decided belle, but a great many that may be called belles. Beauty seems to be more equalized than it used to be; one does not see such real beauty or real plainness as formerly, but a great number of nice-looking girls. I am sure I don't think I saw a plain girl in the room last night."

"I have noticed the same thing," said Mr. Rivers, "but I don't suppose there really is any alteration as far as actual beauty goes; but all girls are more cultivated, and there is less awkwardness and affecta-

tion than there used to be, and taste in dress is more general, and thus the compensating advantages of the plain ones are brought out, and the beauties do not shine by force of contrast so much as formerly."

"But I quite thought Hester would be the belle," said Fanny, "and Hannah said she was sure of it, and Katharine looked so nice too."

"Hester is not dashing enough for *the* belle," said Henry; "besides, she is too young and shy. I really think a girl in her teens never looks altogether so well as one who is turned twenty. But you may comfort yourself, Fanny; Hester was called one of the belles, and made a great many enemies."

"Enemies! how?" exclaimed Caroline, whilst Hester blushed.

"Don't talk nonsense, Henry," said his mother, "but give me some toast."

Caroline resolved to put aside her question till she was alone with her sisters, and proceeded with another.

"And how was Henrietta Brooke dressed? how did she look?"

"Oh, she looked very well," said Katharine. "I am sure she was one of the belles, and her dress was very becoming,—three skirts of white tartalane over white glacé silk, each skirt edged with a narrow gold embroidery, and gold grapes and vine-leaves in her hair. I never saw her look better."

"Too much gilding, I should think," remarked Agatha.

"No, not for Henrietta," said Hester. "She did not look at all over-dressed, though very few people could have worn the head-dress."

"She never will tell what she is going to wear," said Caroline. "I asked her pointblank the other day what she was going to wear at this ball, but she said she had not seen her dress; it had not been sent home."

"She need not be afraid of our imitating her," said Katharine, "for her style would not suit either of us."

"No, indeed," said Henry; "I should like to see you and Hester with a bunch of grapes at each side of your head, and trailing gold tendrils hanging over your shoulders; you would look a couple of guys; but I must say Henrietta looked a regular *stunner* last night; I heard several people say so."

"How did she look this morning?" asked Caroline, in a meaning tone.

"About as well as other people, Caroline," said Mrs. Rivers. "Henrietta can stand as much gaiety as most girls; and I don't like you to get into that way of insinuating that a fine young woman of six or seven and twenty is too faded to be criticized by daylight. You young girls are quite absurd in your use of the word *passée*; I don't like to hear it."

“Henrietta bears daylight pretty well,” said Henry; “besides, she gets herself up so well. You never see her wearing trying colours after she has been sitting up late or tiring herself. I thought she looked quite pretty when she made her first appearance just before dinner to-day, with her lace collar and etceteras and pale pink ribbons. But she was not in a very good temper, I found out.”

“Nonsense, Henry,” said Katharine; “one never sees Henrietta out of temper.”

“I did not notice her particularly to-day,” said Hester.

“Oh, I understand her better than you do,” said Henry.

“Sad experience makes one wise, Henry,” said Mr. Rivers, laughing.

Henry coloured and was silent: he did not like any allusion to his former transient flirtation with Henrietta.

“And was Mr. Merivale there?” proceeded Caroline, “and the cousin? and is he good-looking?”

“Which of them? Mr. Merivale? Yes; he is good-looking, and agreeable too, I think,” said Katharine.

“Did you dance with him?”

“Yes, once; and Hester two or three times.”

“And is Mr. Percival good-looking too? is he young?”

“About thirty, I should think,” said Katharine,

“perhaps a little more—I did not notice his looks particularly, but he talks well.”

“He looks very clever,” said Hester.

“With sharp eyes, I suppose,” said Caroline.

“You seem to have heard a great deal about these gentlemen, Caroline,” said Mrs. Rivers; “who has been talking of them?”

“Oh, cousin Bessy described them to us second-hand one night,” said Katharine; “but I am going upstairs now, Caroline, so I cannot answer any more questions.”

“We have all finished tea,” returned Caroline; “let us come up into your room and have a talk. There is a fire there. Come, Hester.”

Hester rose, and Fanny followed; and Agatha also, to the general surprise.

“Is Agatha going to listen to the ball-gossip of those girls, I wonder?” said Mrs. Rivers to herself, as they all left the room.

It was certainly strange for Agatha to show an inclination to join her sisters’ idle chat, and she felt rather awkward as she followed them upstairs, and said to Hester,—

“You must admit me; I want to hear what you have been doing.”

The truth was, she was very anxious to find out whether Katharine had really enjoyed the ball, and above all, whether she had, in vulgar parlance, “made a conquest.”

To see Katharine occupied with another flirtation would be a relief to her, as, by some jesuitical mode of reasoning, she had persuaded herself into fancying that it would make her duty to give up the letter less stringent.

Agatha had read various books of logic, and could have given good definitions of different fallacies ; but she was blind to the fallacies of her own judgment, and was led by one ungoverned principle to adopt a kind of reasoning she would have ridiculed in another.

She shrank a little from the sight of Katharine's ribbon-box, the remembrance of last night painfully striking her. Another idea also occurred to her. Had she left the packet in its destined place, how extremely probable it was that Katharine would have opened it in the presence of her sisters, and called their attention to it before knowing what it contained !

Therefore, as a matter of policy, she had done well to withdraw it. A trifling consolation surely ! There were other ways and means of conveying the letter to Katharine, had she chosen to search for them.

“ I want to know,” said Caroline, when all the sisters were seated round the fire, “ what Henry meant by saying Hester had made enemies.”

“ Oh,” returned Katharine, “ I fancy he meant that the girls were most of them anxious to dance

with Mr. Merivale, and were vexed that he danced so often with Hester."

"Was he a good partner, Hester? How many times did you dance with him?" asked Caroline.

"Three or four times, I think; he danced very well, and he talked."

"I don't call three or four times anything so very particular," said Caroline.

"You forget," said Katharine, "that Mr. Merivale, being a new arrival, just come into his property, and all that sort of thing, was in great request, and most of the girls were wishing to know him; if Hester had danced six times with any other person, it would not have been so much noticed."

"I wonder what Henrietta Brooke thought," said Caroline. I know she wanted to captivate Mr. Merivale with those gold trimmings; how vexed she will be that you outdid her, Hester!"

"What nonsense!" said Hester; "there was no outdoing in the case. Surely one may dance three times with a person without so much fuss."

"But unless he appeared to admire you, nobody would have cared about it; I wonder when you will see him again! what fun it would be for Hester to——"

"I will not tell you any more about the ball if you run on in that way, Caroline," said Katharine; "no one said anything about Mr. Merivale's admiring Hester, and it is very bad taste to talk so."

"Well, you are growing dreadfully particular, Katharine; I suppose it is no use asking you how often you danced with the same person, or if you made any enemies?"

"I did not dance more than twice with any one," said Katharine.

"Did you dance twice with Mr. Merivale?"

"No; once with him, and twice with Mr. Percival."

"I should like to see them before I go back to school," said Caroline; "I fancy they are rather above the people one generally sees here."

"They are above associating with us, at any rate," said Hester, "except, perhaps, at balls. You know the county people do not visit us."

"Mr. Merivale told me though, this morning," said Katharine, "that he wanted to come over to see papa: when he was a child, papa used to be kind to him."

"Oh, he will go to the office, I dare say," said Hester.

"Do you mean to say you saw them this morning?" asked Caroline.

"Yes; they stayed the night, at least what was left of it, at the hotel," said Katharine; "and before we came away, they and Arthur Simpson and some other young men lounged into the Simpsons'. Arthur, you know, slept at the hotel, the house was so full, and they were all wandering about to kill time."

“Were you in the room when they called, Hester?” pursued the insatiable Caroline.

“Yes; but really I don’t see why you should cross-question me in this way,” said Hester; “it is not fair; I am sure Agatha thinks so.”

Agatha, who had been silent hitherto, now surprised them all, by rather taking part with Caroline.

“People who stay at home generally like to hear a full account,” she said; “and I don’t think you and Katharine enter into details so much as you generally do. I dare say Caroline would like you to begin at the beginning and give a regular narrative of your proceedings from leaving the house to entering it again. I should like it too,” she added, ashamed of sheltering her own curiosity behind that of Caroline.

Katharine looked up to see whether Agatha was speaking sarcastically, but she could not trace a sneer upon her face, and she felt compelled to believe that she had spoken in earnest; so she said,—

“Well, if you like, I will try to give you such an account, only Hester must help me.”

“Oh, do,” said Fanny, clapping her hands; “it will be like hearing a story.”

“I am afraid you are too fond of ball-stories, Fanny,” said Hester; “have you no lessons to learn for to-morrow?”

“Hester is quite severe to-night,” said Caroline. “Do let poor Fanny stay, or else we shall think there is something about the ball you are afraid of mentioning. I’m sure an account of whom you danced with, and how people were dressed, cannot harm her.”

“I should find it all out if you did not tell me,” said Fanny. “I know mamma would tell me a great deal, and I could guess the rest, and I can keep secrets, if you have any, Katharine.”

“Secrets ! oh, no, child ; there are no mysteries connected with this ball that I know of ; Hester was only thinking that a little girl like you should not be so very curious about grown-up people. But I don’t know what we are all making such a fuss about. Here, then, I begin the history of our adventures.”

But this narrative, as Katharine gave it in a mock-grandiose way, does not contain many things of importance to our story. It is enough to say that Agatha could not gather, either from it or from Hester’s additions and corrections, that Katharine had “made a conquest,” or that she had wished to do so. If there had been anything of the kind in the experiences of the sisters, Hester, and not Katharine, was the heroine of it, and Mr. Merivale the captive.

To the conjectures, however, of Caroline on this subject, Agatha did not pay the slightest heed ;

it was of no consequence to her who admired Hester, though in Katharine's case she heartily wished to see a successor to Mr. Wentworth. She could not resist a feeling of self-reproach if even Katharine looked pale or seemed out of spirits, or in any way gave cause for suspicion that her sentiments were not of the light nature which Agatha had always imagined them to be.

Agatha's life was, in short, one of continual uneasiness and dread. Sometimes she thought Mr. Wentworth might write again, and inquiries would be made about the missing letter; sometimes she again enclosed it in an explanatory letter of her own, and formed plans for placing it in Katharine's way; sometimes she boldly determined to speak instead of writing; but all her resolutions and all her plans ended in nothing; paper after paper was written and destroyed, and the important letter still lay concealed in her desk.

Had it not been for the distraction of her new interests at Greymore, life would have been unbearable. She threw herself heart and soul into business as a species of relief; corresponded with Philip Thorpe about it; read books on geology and studied the maps he sent her of the portion of country about Greymore, the bearing of the iron-beds, &c.; she calculated expenses with her father; she formed innumerable projects to be realized, when the Greymore lands were redeemed; and she endeavoured in

every way to shut out the thoughts of the past few months and the occurrences of a few weeks ago.

At the same time she was evidently becoming more sociable, and less inclined to consider the pursuits of others frivolous and foolish. In truth, she could not help owning that she had sunk below the level of those of whom she had thought so lightly; and, though not humble enough to confess that she had done wrong, she was yet sufficiently mortified in her own estimation to judge others more leniently than formerly.

Meantime, Caroline had not been disappointed of her wish to see Mr. Merivale. Two or three evenings after the Kinsford ball Mr. Rivers mentioned that Mr. Merivale had been at the office in the morning.

“He is as nice a young fellow as I have seen for some time,” he added, “and will be a credit to the neighbourhood; he spoke, Annie, of having seen you and your daughters at the ball the other night, and asked if he might make his next call at the house, instead of at the office, that he might inquire how you were after your fatigues, &c.”

“I don’t like people of that sort calling,” said Mrs. Rivers. “I quite agree with what you say in his praise, but he belongs to a class above ours, and I think such intimacies are better let alone.”

“But his call will be partly a business one,” said

Mr. Rivers, "for he must see me again before he leaves the neighbourhood, and he asked me particularly when I should be at home. I mentioned Saturday afternoon, as I am never at the office then, and I do not suppose you will see him before that day. It would have been absurd to make difficulties; and, after all, his family is not so much better than yours and mine."

"The Merivales never associated with the Thorpes," said Mrs. Rivers.

"What of that? The Thorpes were respectable yeomanry when the Merivales were landless squires, and the fortune of this very young man has been partly gained by trade. I am sure he has not got any ridiculous ideas of his own importance."

"I am to shoot with him some day next week," observed Henry; "he was regretting he had only come in for the tail of the season."

"And you say he is going away soon?" said Mrs. Rivers to her husband.

"Yes; by the advice of Mr. Percival. You know he has been brought up almost entirely on the Continent, his father spending the last years of his life there, and having a great opinion of a continental education; and thus he knows very little of England. Mr. Percival advises him to visit all our large towns, to get some idea of our manufactures, and acquaint himself with the state of the country generally. He wishes to have time for this, or part of it, at any

rate, before the London season commences, when of course he will rush up to town to get a little experience of London life."

Mrs. Rivers seemed satisfied, and the conversation was not pursued.

On Saturday afternoon an attentive observer would have discerned that Hester was unusually solicitous about her personal appearance. Not that her ordinary winter costume allowed of much variation, but the nicely fitting dark blue merino dress was adorned by a remarkably pretty collar, and enlivened by a neck-ribbon which had hitherto been considered rather *recherché* for every-day wear. Agatha, being on the look-out for any marks of interest in Katharine about the expected visit, remarked Hester's little decorations, which would not otherwise have attracted her attention. As for Katharine, there was not the slightest alteration in her demeanour.

Saturday afternoon did not pass without bringing Mr. Merivale to Hazel Bank. Agatha, Hester, and Katharine happened to be together in the drawing-room, and they saw him and Mr. Percival ride up to the house. Soon afterwards Caroline came in, and announced that they had been ushered into the dining-room, and were having a conference with Mr. Rivers.

"I hope they will come here before they go," added Caroline. "I have not had a good look at

them ; but suppose it should only be a business call after all !”

“ In that case, they would have gone to the office,” said Hester ; “ but, at any rate, we need not distress ourselves about it. I wish, Katharine, you would help me to arrange this pattern ; I cannot make it join properly at the corners.”

Katharine moved her seat to the table by Hester, and they were both busy arranging the pattern, when the visitors entered the room, accompanied by Mr. Rivers.

Mrs. Rivers, who almost instantly followed, received the greatest share of Mr. Merivale’s attention ; that is to say, he talked to her, and looked at Hester. Mr. Percival entered into general conversation with the air of a man of the world, but when, some minutes afterwards, Mr. Rivers withdrew to look for a paper he wished to show Mr. Merivale, he, by degrees, addressed himself exclusively to Katharine. He might, certainly, be in some degree compelled to it, for Agatha was not yet skilled in furnishing her part in the social small-talk, and Caroline, though precocious in private, and fond of talking *about* gentlemen, was yet rather shy and school-girlish when *with* them, especially if they were strangers.

Hester was fully occupied with the conversation between her mother and Mr. Merivale, not saying much except when appealed to by the latter, but

still, answering in a way which seemed to prove she “got on” with him better than she usually did with young men of his age. He was, in fact, different from any she had hitherto met; his foreign education had taken from him all traces of boyish shyness or rawness, and his knowledge of his position in the neighbourhood, though far from rendering him presuming or forward, gave a frankness and cordiality to his manner,—the sort of genial freedom of one who is conscious that he will be well received and leniently judged, not on account of his own merits, but from old associations and *prestige*.

And a blithe, happy temperament was one of Leonard Merivale’s leading characteristics, visible in his clear bright eye, and joyous smile, and on his serene and still perfectly smooth brow, which Phoebe had described as *innocent*, by which term, perhaps, she meant to express her sense of his candid, genuine, unruffled nature.

He had been much struck with Hester’s beauty at the ball, and had exerted all his powers to please and interest her; and as under his sunny exterior there lurked much of that steady sincerity of judgment and seriousness of thought in which Hester delighted, he had not been unsuccessful. He was not long in winning golden opinions from her mother also, notwithstanding Mrs. Rivers’ involuntary shrinking from intercourse with any one above her in the social scale, and her prudent inclination to check any

further progress of his attentions towards Hester—attentions which, however, she would scarcely have observed, had she not heard them remarked upon by others in the ball-room,—Mrs. Rivers not being one of those mothers who fancy the whole world on the point of falling in love with their daughters.

Katharine and Mr. Percival meanwhile carried on an unflagging conversation, and Agatha fancied that she had never seen Katharine so animated, or so desirous of pleasing, since Mr. Wentworth's disappearance.

Mr. Percival was a man of two or three and thirty, not at all handsome, but with strong, decided features, and a very intellectual expression, an unusually tall and well-formed, but rather wiry figure, and a commanding, somewhat haughty air.

His manner had nothing of the winning frankness of his young cousin's, and might slightly awe strangers; but his conversation, when he chose to exert himself, was wonderfully agreeable, and his voice, a little imperious at first, had a certain thrilling impressiveness when he became serious, and cast aside his worldly tone, which was not without captivation for a lively fancy.

Agatha soon decided that he was a sort of person for Katharine to like, at any rate to feel proud of pleasing; and as he was evidently pleased with her, she trusted that the acquaintance would be pursued,

and that he would, in time, obliterate the impression of Mr. Wentworth.

“Aunt Sophia and Lucy Grover are coming up the walk, Katharine,” interrupted Caroline, who was sitting near the window.

“Are they?” said Katharine, indifferently. “Oh, I remember, Sophia spoke of coming this afternoon, to hear about the ball, as I could not stay to give her an account of it the other morning.”

“I suppose a ball is such an event in this neighbourhood, that it furnishes conversation for a long time,” said Mr. Percival.

“Yes,” said Katharine; “as each person gives a different account, the subject is not soon exhausted. My aunt who is now coming, has already heard all that my brother can say about it, and now she will have our impressions.”

“But she has waited a long time; surely ladies are not generally so patient?”

“The weather has been so unfavourable the last few days,” said Katharine, “that we have not had much communication with Fairfield.”

“And one of those young ladies you call your aunt?” said Mr. Percival, as he gained a glimpse of the figures approaching the house.

“Yes; it sounds absurd, and I don’t often give her the title.”

“Which of them, may I ask? for they look equally young.”

“The shortest and prettiest,” answered Katharine.

“I am glad you said shortest, for prettiest means nothing, except to the person who speaks. Did you ever know two people agree about beauty?”

“Not often,” said Katharine; “but still there are some few, acknowledged beauties by all the world.”

“In that case fashion, rather than taste, decides.”

By this time the new visitors had arrived, and the conversation became less exclusive, though Mr. Percival still kept his place near Katharine, and Mr. Merivale still looked at and appealed to Hester. Altogether there was quite enough to awaken the suspicions of a Mrs. James Thorpe.

She was not sorry for her own part to make acquaintance with the owner of Somerford and his clever cousin, about whom she had heard much in lawyer talk, and gathered that he was likely to become a distinguished man, but she was rather disappointed that they did not pay her more attention. They certainly made an unconscionably long visit, and Mr. Percival at length reminded his cousin of the fact.

Mr. Rivers had by this time returned to the room, and various polite speeches were exchanged amongst the gentlemen.

Mr. Merivale regretted that he must so soon leave home, hoped that Mr. Rivers would visit him when he returned to Somerford, begged him to remind Henry of his shooting engagement, &c. &c.

No sooner had the door closed upon the two young men, Mr. Rivers accompanying them to the gate, where their horses were standing, than Lucy Grover, with her usual want of tact, exclaimed, in a tone which left no doubt of her meaning,—

“Well, Hester!”

“Hush!” said Katharine; “they are scarcely out of the house yet.”

“I only said, ‘Well, Hester!’” returned Lucy, laughing.

“Be quiet, Lucy,” said her sister. “What a splendid horse that is of Mr. Merivale’s; see, he is going to mount. Mrs. Rivers, do look at his horse, and how well he sits it.”

“I am no judge of horses, Sophia,” said Mrs. Rivers; “the quieter and more humdrum the better, to my taste. But you are going to stay tea, of course. Katharine, your aunt and Lucy would like to take off their bonnets, I dare say.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Sophia; “I told James we should probably stay, and he agreed to come for us. He wants to talk to you, Miss Marchmont, about that business of yours, as he understands you heard from Philip this morning. As for me, I shall never get over my astonishment that Philip should meddle with such a thing.”

The last words were spoken as she was following Lucy and Katharine out of the room.

As soon as they were upstairs, Lucy began to

speaking of Hester's conquest; for a conquest she declared Hester had made, and that Mr. Merivale had paid her "most marked attention."

"What an idea, Lucy!" said Katharine. "I dare say Mr. Merivale thinks Hester a pretty girl; she did look very pretty at the ball; but he does not belong to our set, and would never dream of paying her any but common attentions."

"But what made them call to-day?" asked Lucy.

"Mr. Merivale had business with papa," said Katharine; "and as he had met us at the ball, out of mere politeness he called at the house instead of at the office."

"Very likely, indeed!" said Lucy; "but, at any rate, we must tease Hester a little for fun. How grave you are getting, Katharine; I am sure you used to be as fond of teasing as anybody."

"But in this case, Lucy, it would be unpleasant for any unmeaning report to get about," said Katharine. "Hester is below Mr. Merivale in social rank, you know, and I am sure papa and mamma would be displeased at hearing it hinted even that he admired her."

"It is a bad thing for young ladies to be talked about in connection with gentlemen," said Sophia, with the sententious, married-woman air she sometimes assumed; "still, amongst ourselves we may make a remark or two. I suppose you, Katharine,

think that you have been talked about enough with a certain person, so you wish to make a change. I admire your taste this time, I must say. Mr. Percival is not handsome, but he is very distinguished-looking. Mind what you are about."

"You are welcome to tease me, Sophia," said Katharine, laughing; "I am accustomed to it; but you had better let Hester alone. She is so shy that she would be quite uncomfortable the next time she met Mr. Merivale, if you hinted anything to her. Not, however, that it is of much consequence; he is going away, and it will be months before we see him again."

"Time shows all things," said Mrs. James, in her sententious manner; "but now, Katharine, you must tell us about the ball."

"Yes," said Katharine; "but if you are ready we may as well go downstairs, and then you will hear Hester's impressions as well as mine."

"But let us see your dresses first," said Lucy.

"Their freshest beauty is over," said Katharine, opening a wardrobe; "however, here they are."

Lucy admired them rapturously; Sophia, whose praise was seldom unqualified, more moderately. She wondered why the skirts of tulle had not been trimmed with narrow ribbon instead of fringe, and why Katharine's red flowers had not been mixed with white.

Then they all went downstairs and talked over the ball, of which we have already heard enough.

Some time after tea, when only the younger members of the party happened to be in the room, Sophia and Lucy commenced a series of attacks upon Hester and Katharine. Agatha, as usual, was disgusted with their bad taste and folly, and yet she watched and listened eagerly to find out how Katharine bore their teasing. She thought she seemed pleased, and did not make any effort to discourage it.

Agatha was right; Katharine was glad to be considered again capable of flirtation, and no longer pining for Mr. Wentworth, and her vanity, which could not be at once eradicated, even by suffering and uncertainty, was gratified by Mr. Percival's notice.

She did not think it likely that she should meet him again, and did not greatly care, but she had enjoyed the sense of being appreciated by a superior man, and she did not object to hear remarks upon the subject, though she fully saw the absurdity of Sophia and Lucy, in rushing to conclusions from the trifling indications they had witnessed. She was also glad to spare Hester as much as she could the inconsiderate raillery of the sisters, for she suspected her case to be very unlike her own. She believed Mr. Merivale's admiration was sincere, and also that Hester was considerably impressed by it.

To make her think seriously of him, as matters stood at present, would be most unwise, and even if the acquaintance were renewed, and Mr. Merivale pursued his attentions, it would be objectionable to have them talked about, unless they were to lead to important results. Mere flirtation was, she knew, quite out of Hester's line. Agatha certainly had some foundation for thinking Mr. Wentworth was forgotten, and she again sophistically tried to satisfy her conscience by thinking that she had done Katharine no harm. Later in the evening she might have been undeceived, but she was talking with Mr. James Thorpe of Greymore and iron-mines, when Sophia exclaimed,—

“Oh, I quite forgot to tell you, girls, a piece of news I heard this morning; the ball put it out of my head, I suppose: Mr. Manners has got his new living, and is going away immediately to take possession of it, and to be married also, I imagine.”

Katharine's countenance suddenly clouded: Hester saw it, and said to Mrs. James,—

“Are you quite sure the news is true?”

“Quite; Miss Penrose told me this morning, and Mr. Manners had just been at the Rectory. I dare say he will be calling to say good-bye to you in a day or two. We shall rather miss him at first.”

“I hope the next Coverdale clergyman will be nice,” said Lucy, whose thoughts were running on

to Mr. Manners' successor, who might be neither married nor engaged.

Katharine recovered herself quickly, and talked in her ordinary manner, but the information she had just received fell like a weight upon her heart: Mr. Manners seemed the last link between herself and Mr. Wentworth, and she never saw him without hoping to hear something about his friend.

Now it was all over; no one could tell her anything of his proceedings, for even Grace Oakenshaw, now the Burton family had left Annesley, had no chance of sending her any stray tidings of him.

This day was not without significance to Katharine. A chapter of the romance of life seemed decisively closed for her, whilst for Hester, perhaps, one was just opening.

CHAPTER XI.

CHANGES.—A MARRIAGE.

TIME passes, and the quiet surface of domestic life presents little variety ; but draw up the curtain again, after a seemingly uneventful period has elapsed, and the changes that have taken place appear striking and sudden.

Imagine, then, that three years and a half have passed since the close of the last chapter, and look in once more at Hazel Bank.

It is a glorious morning, the first of June, and an important event is evidently in progress.

The bustle and confusion of the household, the flitting about of light dresses, the long table in the dining-room spread out in shining array of silver and glass, the gigantic frosted cake in the centre, with its floral emblems, the very atmosphere of white kid gloves which seems to permeate the house, sufficiently indicate what is going on ; and a glance into the room, hitherto occupied by Katharine and Hester, solves any difficulty that remains.

For Hester sits in state before the toilette glass,

and fond, watching eyes are fixed upon her, and eager young hands arrange the glistening, delicate robes, and twine the snowy bridal flowers, and Hester is this day a bride. The bridegroom, whom the most unsuspecting of readers will instinctively know to be Mr. Merivale, waits meanwhile in the church, which is crowded with spectators, for this is the grandest wedding that has been celebrated in Fairfield for many a year, and loud and various is public opinion concerning it.

That Hester, the quiet, unpretending Hester, even with her undeniable beauty, should make such a match, astonished many; others qualified their surprise with a reference to the adage, "Still waters run deep."

This, applied to Hester, was true enough, though not in the sense that was intended. Shy, retiring, undemonstrative, she had no turn for flirtation, no desire to attract notice. The first person who seriously admired her was one well calculated to draw forth the steady, calm tenderness of her nature. He was firm, high-minded, and independent of control; he rapidly made choice of her as his wife, and with an unwavering hand he swept away all obstacles to his course. Few obstacles, indeed, stood in his way; he had no one whom he was obliged to consult, and the only objection Hester's friends could raise, was that he was too good a match for her. In the early days of his wooing, both Mr.

and Mrs. Rivers had seemed anxious to check his intercourse with the family; Mr. Rivers dreaded to be thought, or to become, plotting and mercenary, and Mrs. Rivers was too proud of her own class to wish her daughters to step out of it.

But Leonard Merivale was too much in earnest long to delay the declaration of his feelings to Hester, and she was much too serious and simple-minded to conceal hers from him, however frightened she might be at her own temerity. The proposal once made, Mr. Rivers had nothing tangible to oppose; a reference to Mr. Merivale's friends was of no use; he had merely distant relations, about whose opinions he had no occasion to trouble himself, and the only one whom he knew intimately and cared about, was Mr. Percival, who was decidedly in favour of his marriage with Hester.

All, therefore, that Mr. Rivers could do was to insist upon delay. The engagement was to be conditional for two years; Mr. Merivale was bound by no promise, but was to "see the world," and to judge from his experience in different circles of society, whether he had chosen hastily. Hester, too, was left perfectly free, and no correspondence took place between them.

But intercourse could not be forbidden, and Mr. Merivale, in intervals of "seeing the world," naturally found his way to his own home, and opportunities of meeting Hester.

They both passed through the ordeal with constancy; and Mr. Rivers, though talking a little about unequal matches, had satisfied his conscience that he had not tried to make one, and when all was settled, could not repress a certain blameless exultation at the lot that seemed before his daughter.

Another year, however, passed before the marriage took place; both parties were very young, and Hester's parents, under the circumstances, were extremely unwilling to hurry matters, perhaps rather needlessly afraid of being accused of seizing upon good fortune for Hester.

She, simple and unworldly as a child, thought nothing of being mistress of Somerford, but everything of the generous, faithful heart she had gained; and gave herself up with all the freshness of untried feelings to the delights of a happy and worthy attachment. And if she appeared about to enter upon as fortunate and favoured a career as earth could offer her, few could help owning that she deserved it; even envy and malice could find little to say against one so unassuming.

Whatever grandeur might attend her, it had certainly been thrust upon her, rather than acquired by any efforts of her own. She made a very lovely bride; three years had developed her prettiness into beauty, and awakened feeling had gifted her face with expression. Her manner, too, was improved; retiring, and in some degree shy, it still was, but

it was now free from embarrassment and girlish uncertainty.

The bridegroom was pronounced by the ancient crones at the churchyard gate—severest of critics—worthy of such a bride; and the bridesmaids, Hester's four sisters, Grace Oakenshaw, and a young distant cousin of Leonard Merivale's, were good-looking enough to form a pretty group, particularly in their light, tasteful dresses; but really, further description would savour too much of the county paper, and Hester's wedding is only a passing incident of this story, and Hester herself not one of its proper heroines.

The due amount of kissing and crying, signing and congratulating, bell-ringing and money-flinging, being happily accomplished, the bridal train returned to Hazel Bank, and, of course, sat down to a "sumptuous breakfast."

The party was large, though mere acquaintances were professedly left out; Mr. Percival was there as the bridegroom's "best man" and nearest relation, and two or three connections of his family sanctioned his marriage with their presence. Of course there was a goodly attendance of Hester's own family and friends.

Mr. Percival and Katharine sat together at breakfast: the intimacy between them had not progressed so rapidly, or led to such an important event, as that between Hester and Leonard had done; but still,

whenever they had met, they had been very good friends, and Mr. Percival had always eagerly seized every opportunity of being with Katharine. But he was not, people said, a marrying man; and few persons, least of all Katharine herself, prognosticated such a result from their increasing intercourse.

It is strange how subjects of conversation change in any community from one year to another!

A little more than three years ago, at a Fairfield party, assembled for any purpose whatever, the grand Burton failure would have furnished an inexhaustible topic; now it was never mentioned, merged completely and buried under a heap of later interests. Then, too, the discovery of iron on the Greymore estate, and the extraordinary flight of Philip Thorpe, would, at most tables, have called forth a variety of remarks; now, these also had passed away like a nine days' wonder, and Philip's continued residence at Greymore, and present employment, had become matters of course, exciting no discussion except when the success of the undertaking was referred to in a casual way.

Mr. Manners too, his new living, and his marriage with the Dean's daughter, all fruitful sources of gossip formerly, were numbered amongst the "have beens;" as for Mr. Wentworth, he had long ago vanished into obscurity. Of the two young men, who, four years since, had been, *par excellence*, the

young men of every party, it might be almost said, in the sentimental words of the song, "their names were never heard."

The new incumbent of Coverdale was no longer new, and Fairfield no longer found in him anything to talk about; even Lucy Grover had settled that he was not a marrying man, and ceased to trouble her head about him. He was oldish, bachelorish in his ways, a hard-working parish priest; a favourite with old women and children, and a welcome guest at most houses, on account of his hearty good temper, and a certain degree of dry, comic humour. A greater contrast to the learned, grave, refined, fastidious Mr. Manners could not well be imagined. The faint image he had left seemed almost obliterated by the more prominent, active individuality of his successor.

The Coverdale clergyman, though he had not "assisted" Mr. Penrose in performing the marriage ceremony, was one of the guests at the breakfast, and was sitting between the two Mrs. Thorpes, but chiefly attending to Mrs. Thorpe of the Grange. She and her husband, kind, and genuine, and homely as ever, seemed as well pleased with the world in general, as if no disappointment had touched them regarding their schemes for Philip.

He, too, could not be absent from Hester's wedding; and the alteration which had been made in him by upwards of three years of manly, self-chosen exertion

requires more description than can be given at present. He sat next to Agatha, and talked of Grey-more, which he had only left the day before.

Miss Bessy Thorpe, radiant in white ribbons and marvellous flowers, was beaming with good nature, and, alas! encouraging the bridesmaids in romantic notions of love and happiness, declaring that Hester's lot was to be envied, not on account of the Somerford acres, but because she had married her first love. One connection of the family, who might have been expected to grace the assembly with her good looks and charming manners, was not present—Henrietta Brooke.

The cause of her absence was an important one: she was shortly to be a bride herself, and the preparation of her *trousseau* and the society of her betrothed fully occupied her time.

Mr. Percival, who had seen her at the memorable Kinsford ball, and once or twice afterwards at Hazel Bank, asked Katharine what had become of her. Mrs. James Thorpe, who was near, answered before Katharine could speak—

“Oh, don't you know, Mr. Percival? Miss Brooke is too busy to go to other peoples' weddings now; she is engaged to be married at last.”

“At last! Are you aware, Mrs. Thorpe, that you are speaking in a very significant way?—what do you mean to imply?”

“Oh, you know as well as I do, Mr. Percival, that

although Henrietta does dress up remarkably well in the evening, she is not so young as she has been ; not at all young, indeed, for a bride."

"Falling into the sere and yellow leaf, as we poor briefless barristers do, before we can dream of matrimony," said Mr. Percival, with mock sadness.

"Oh, for you gentlemen it is no consequence," said Sophia ; "no one expects to see you married so soon. It is not often one meets a couple so young as the present bride and bridegroom, at least a man as young as Mr. Merivale, for many girls marry as young as Hester."

"Yourself, for instance, I should imagine," said Mr. Percival, "but then *you*, like Mrs. Merivale, form no rule for others. *Some* must wait."

Sophia enjoyed the implied compliment, and said—

"I was young certainly, but perhaps it is as well, after all, not to enter quite so early upon the cares and duties of married life. But what made me speak of Miss Brooke as being engaged 'at last' was principally because she had so long been making efforts after a good match, and I dare say it was mortifying to her to see so many of her young companions married before her. I fancy Hester's marriage has hurried her a little, or she would not have taken Mr. Johnson."

"Is he not a desirable *parti*, then?" asked Mr. Percival.

“Yes: he has plenty of money, but he is old—old even for a man; and he is a widower, and has not been always a gentleman. He made his money in some inferior kind of trade, and I believe he is a rough sort of man.”

“You are mistaken, Sophia,” said Katharine; “I have seen Mr. Johnson, and he is as gentlemanly as most people, though not what one would consider an attractive person.”

“Then I suppose Henrietta will not have to be ashamed of him,” said Sophia; “at any rate, even if she had, she would have kept him in order no doubt, and she could not expect to get everything. If she has plenty of money and her own way, she will put up with the rest, and it is not everybody who succeeds so well.”

“Poor Henrietta!” said Katharine. “I think she was meant for better things than mere money and a good position.”

“You always were partial to Henrietta Brooke,” said Sophia. “I am sure I don’t know why, Katharine, for I don’t think she behaved particularly well to you in all instances. Well, I will not say any more: bygones are bygones; but I did not think I could make you blush at this distance of time.”

Katharine had not blushed, but she had shown by a change of countenance that she understood Sophia’s allusion. It came upon her so suddenly; Sophia had

long ago ceased to tease her about that former time: what made her revive it now? Simply because she thought Mr. Percival was beginning to pay serious attention to Katharine, and with her usual disinterestedness she thought it might be as well to give him a hint that he was not the first person with whom Katharine had flirted.

She had succeeded in awakening his attention: he saw that Katharine had been reminded of something which touched her feelings, but, as she instantly recovered herself, he did not attach much importance to it.

Mrs. James Thorpe meanwhile continued to talk to him, still taking Henrietta's marriage as her theme.

"Don't you think the mercenary matches that are made in our days are disgusting, Mr. Percival? Girls think of nothing but an establishment: what can be the cause of such a state of things?"

"Do you think there ever was a golden age when it was otherwise?" said Mr. Percival.

"Oh, yes; surely it must have been different formerly. Indeed, even since I can remember, I think people considered real attachment of more importance. Of course, even now there are exceptions."

"I am sure of that," said Mr. Percival; "beauty is not always self-interested, or we should not find so many lovely married women, who have been con-

tented to remain in their own class, instead of aspiring to the higher lot they might doubtless have commanded. One may be induced by this to hope that one's own fate is not desperate."

Katharine saw that he was quizzing Sophia, and, though amused by the way in which she applied and swallowed his flatteries, she tried to turn the conversation; a piece of interference which Sophia set down to jealousy.

"Did you ever see Philip Thorpe before?" commenced Mrs. James, after Katharine and Mr. Percival had exchanged a few remarks.

"No; he has always been absent on my former visits here," answered Mr. Percival.

"Then you cannot judge how much he is altered; he used to be so awkward and shy; now, though I don't mean to say he has fascinating manners, he looks like a person of importance, and one could not overlook him. Are you not surprised at the change, Katharine? I know Henrietta Brooke was when she last saw him. I really believe, if she had not thought it was too late to try for him, she would have preferred him to her rich old man."

"Too late!" said Mr. Percival; "is Mr. Philip Thorpe an engaged man?"

"No; not engaged; but things look rather suspicious there, across the table," said Sophia, glancing towards Agatha and Philip.

"Oh, Sophia! what an idea," exclaimed Katha-

rine. "Agatha may tolerate Philip now, and even appear intimate with him on account of their common interests, but I do not think she would change so much as to——."

"My dear Katharine, we all change our opinions of a person when he changes so much himself. Even you, I suppose, think differently of Philip to what you did four years ago; you had no idea what he would turn out."

"I shall come to you to give me a regular *carte du pays*," said Mr. Percival to Sophia. "I see there are many under-currents in this smooth Fairfield society which I had not suspected."

"You had better put it off altogether till to-morrow," said Katharine, laughing. "Agatha will soon find out if you continue talking about her, Sophia."

"I know she has a knack of hearing what is not intended for her," said Sophia.

A rapping sound on the table interrupted further conversation. A speech was about to be made, proposing the health of the bride and the bridegroom, and henceforth, speechifying was the order of the day, until the ladies withdrew: Hester, to prepare for her journey.

Parting on such occasions must be more or less painful: though Hester would be settled within a short distance of her old home, and her future destiny looked bright and cloudless, still she would never be again what she had been in her parents' house. It

was a severing of old habits and associations which could never be joined together again; affection and duty might be undiminished, and intercourse might be frequent, but there would be no place at table called Hester's; no favourite corner in which she would be sought.

Perhaps, of all the household, Katharine would miss her the most; they had been so inseparable, so unreserved together, so truly sisters in thought and feeling. Whatever they might be in future to each other, they could never again be exactly the same; a period in their existence had closed, and it could no more return than they could remain girls for life.

Katharine felt all this fully, but she kept up bravely and did not cry. A long, silent kiss was exchanged between the sisters, and that was all: a few moments later, and Hester was driving off in her husband's carriage, watched by a large party collected on the steps, and a numerous assemblage of servants and retainers in the garden, an old woman amongst the latter not failing to throw an old shoe for luck after the happy couple.

Those who were left behind had to get through the day as well as they could: some of the guests went to their homes, and were to return in the evening to the dance, to which all the dancing people in the neighbourhood were invited.

Others, who came from some distance, remained,

and had to be entertained, or to entertain themselves, in the house and gardens, through the slow hours of an unsettled day.

The more sober-minded sat under trees, and read or talked quietly ; but the more excitable could only wander about restlessly, and long for the evening.

Katharine had plenty to do in one way or other, but she was assisted by Agatha to an extent that would have seemed incredible to any one who had known her three or four years ago, and had not met her since.

In truth, Agatha was outwardly greatly changed, most people said improved, though she often acted in an inconsistent way, which they could not understand, and still frequently exposed herself to the charges of coldness and reserve.

In appearance she was considerably altered ; she was much less thin, and her face had acquired a roundness of outline which softened the decision of her features, and modified the severity of her expression. Her complexion, though still pale, was clearer and more healthy, and seemed to have become fairer, because from her greater plumpness fewer shadows were visible, and her figure, being less angular from the same cause, looked more graceful.

She dressed, too, with greater taste than formerly, and to-day in her light, gay attire, had little resemblance to the Agatha in black crape and pre-raphaelite folds of four years ago. Her manner

was no less changed; she now listened patiently to gossip, and cast in a word of inquiry or interest at the right time, and she had of late taken her part as a daughter of the house, in receiving guests and performing little household duties. She talked, if not freely, at least willingly, and with seeming pleasure, to Mrs. Rivers, and behaved to the rest of the family in a moderately affectionate manner, appearing to enter into their concerns. But still, there was something—no one knew exactly what it was—but it would have made them hesitate in describing Agatha's character.

Her greatest intimacy had been with Hester, which was strange enough, as in the early days of her residence at Hazel Bank, Katharine and she had appeared more likely to become friends. But with Katharine, Agatha was still reserved; she seldom entered into exclusive conversation with her, or sought her companionship, and yet she was evidently not indifferent about her. She was always anxious to procure any little pleasure for her, and would deny herself a real gratification to give a possible one to Katharine.

On this, Hester's wedding-day, Agatha spoke no word of sympathy to Katharine, though she was standing near and saw the farewell kiss between the sisters, and could see how much Katharine's calmness cost her; but all through the day she was on the watch to spare her every exertion she could;

she undertook to talk herself to the heavy people, and busied herself about any little arrangements that had to be made for the evening, which generally fell within Katharine's province.

How was it then?—was Agatha really improved?—had she cast away pride and self-will, and tried to accommodate herself to those about her, and to do her duty in the circumstances in which she was placed? Had she confessed the fault committed so long ago, and become tolerant and kindly, from consciousness of the deceitfulness of her own heart? No: Agatha's fault and deceit were still buried within her own breast; and, therefore, not yet sincerely repented. And yet her conduct seemed much what it might have done had she made her meditated confession to Katharine; but Agatha's mind was in a state of strange contradiction; she knew she had done wrong, and though she had not strength to confess it, she could no longer persevere in her harsh judgments of others; she could no longer require perfection, when she knew how much worse she really was than she appeared to them.

Long ago she had commenced watching Katharine from a wish to ascertain what were her feelings towards Mr. Wentworth; minute watching had taught her sympathy; sympathy had led to love. Agatha now understood and appreciated Katharine; her heart yearned towards her as a sister; many a time she

longed to throw her arms round her, and declare the deep feelings of affection which were swelling within her, but a recollection of her past conduct flashed upon her, and with a heart bursting with tenderness she yet compelled herself to turn coldly away.

Agatha's attachments were strong and passionate when once awakened; the one she felt for Katharine was now the predominant feeling of her nature, and all the stronger for being crushed back and concealed.

But love to Katharine, sympathy with and observation of her, had made her more loving, sympathetic, and observant in general. To the whole family she was more affectionate than formerly, and more alive to their merits. She tried to behave with more kindness and cordiality towards them, and, not being checked by self-reproach in the same way as she was in her relations with Katharine, she succeeded to a considerable extent.

Was it strange that, with an unconfessed fault gnawing at her heart, her conduct should seem to spring from a more Christian frame of mind than it had hitherto done?—that fruits of virtue should arise from deeply-rooted error?

The question is too serious to be answered here. The human heart has depths we may not hope to penetrate; they must remain shrouded in secret mystery. Whatever might be Agatha's innermost feelings, her outward actions were improved, and on

some points too her opinions were altered for the better. It might be that she was gradually working round to a state of mind which would make persistence in concealment impossible to her; perhaps a long course of slow improvement, slow awakening to her mistaken views, and increasing humility in comparing herself with others, must be passed through, before she could so deeply humble herself as to acknowledge that she had been guilty of meanness and treachery.

If her long silence be thought unnatural, it must be remembered that the delay of each day made confession more difficult, and that increased affection for Katharine redoubled the pain and shame of showing herself before her in a despicable light.

She was now walking down the garden with cousin Bessy, who was just going home, though she intended to return in the evening to have a peep at the dancing.

“Is not your Phœbe here?” said Agatha, as they reached the garden gate; “will you not have her to walk home with you?”

“No, my dear” (cousin Bessy sometimes called Agatha “my dear” now), “she is not here; she thought a great deal of coming to see the grand dresses and Miss Hester driving off in a carriage of her own, but she is not at all well. The day before yesterday she complained of a bad sore throat, and yesterday she was so poorly she made up her mind

she could not come to-day; and as she wished to go home to her mother to be nursed, I really thought it was the best thing I could do to send her, for I was getting rather alarmed about her, and her mother would attend to her better than I could; though I would not have grudged the trouble, goodness knows, for Phoebe is a good girl. So John Watson took her in his cart on his way to Kinsford market, and we put a chair and some pillows in it, and wrapped her up well, though it was warm this morning, and I hope she will not take any harm.

“But was she seriously ill?—or was it only a sore throat?” asked Agatha. “You know scarlet fever is in the neighbourhood.”

“I declare that never struck me till this moment,” said cousin Bessy; “and yet, now I think of it, Phoebe told me the other day, they were afraid Dick Sutton’s little sister was beginning in it, and I charged her not to go near the house, or to see Dick. He is her sweetheart, you know, and, as he is a respectable young man, I let him come two nights a week to see her. Some people think me foolish, I dare say, but, poor things! it is hard upon them not to give them a chance of being married. You know we are not all old maids from choice, Miss Agatha.”

“It must inconvenience you a good deal to be without Phoebe, I should think,” said Agatha.

“Oh, I should not think of that in the least, my dear; Ann Hodgson is coming for to-night and to-

morrow, and if Phœbe does not get better, I shall send for a girl from the charity-school. But I cannot get that scarlet fever out of my head; suppose I should have caught the infection from Phœbe! I am not afraid for myself, at my age, but I might carry it in my clothes to some one else. I declare I wish I had thought of it before; I ought not to have come amongst you all to-day. And Katharine and Fanny were over at our house, the very day Phœbe began to complain. Oh, what should I do, if they were to catch it?"

"I am sorry I mentioned the subject," said Agatha; "but I don't think you need alarm yourself so much. It is not by any means certain that Phœbe has the complaint; and if she has, doctors now generally agree that it is only an epidemic."

"Ah, but I reckon nothing of doctors," said cousin Bessy, shaking her head; "an epidemic or no epidemic, I notice when one of a family takes it, the rest follow, and that is what I call being infectious; and I know for a fact, that it sometimes is carried in clothes from one person to another."

"Well, at any rate, do not distress yourself till you hear something of Phœbe," said Agatha.

But cousin Bessy took no heed.

"How I wish I had not come here to-day! I shall never forgive myself if any one takes it. At any rate I will not come again; I should like to see the dancing to-night, but I had better stay away;

so, pray, be so kind as to excuse me to my cousin Rivers."

"But she will be alarmed if I tell her your reason," said Agatha; "and so will some others, I dare say; and you know nothing is so likely to bring on illness as fear. I think it would be much better for you to come."

"Indeed, I could not do such a thing after the idea you have put into my head; and even now, I am staying talking to you when I ought to go away. And you can manage to excuse me, without saying anything to frighten Mrs. Rivers. I know how anxious she is, poor thing! and no wonder, with such a fine family."

Agatha had not a turn for persuasion, so she allowed cousin Bessy to depart without further expostulation. She walked towards the house rather vexed with herself. Whenever she tried to be kind and agreeable, she seemed fated to say wrong things. She had now, by her carelessness in mentioning a piece of news in the way of small-talk, thrown cousin Bessy into a state of fidget and uneasiness, and also brought upon herself the duty of accounting for her absence without alarming Mrs. Rivers. She looked upon the fear of infection as a species of folly, but still she had learnt to make allowances for others, and she did not communicate her intelligence in the straightforward, blunt manner she would have done a few years previous.

She had not an opportunity of speaking to her stepmother alone till towards the evening; she was carrying some fresh flowers to adorn what had been the breakfast but was now to be the supper table, when she met Mrs. Rivers, who was taking a general survey of the room.

“I am afraid we shall be rather crowded, Agatha,” she said, as the latter placed the flowers on the table.

“You will have one less guest than you expect,” said Agatha, “Miss Bessy Thorpe is not coming.”

“Bessy not coming!” exclaimed Mrs. Rivers, “and she is so fond of seeing them dance; what is the matter?”

“Nothing very particular; her maid Phœbe is not well, and has gone home; and, from my happening to mention scarlet fever, Miss Thorpe has got some fears into her head about it, and will not go anywhere till it is ascertained what Phœbe’s illness is.”

“Oh, dear, I wish we had known before; some of the children were at cousin Bessy’s only the other day, and I have been so careful all this time to keep them out of the way of infection. What is the matter with Phœbe? How long has she been ill?”

“Only since the day before yesterday; she complained of a sore throat, but I dare say it is only a cold. And really,” continued Agatha, seeing Mrs. Rivers look frightened, “I don’t think there is much to fear even if it should turn out scarlet fever. I have gone

amongst people who had it at Greymore, and never caught it.”

“I don’t like running risks,” said Mrs. Rivers. “How I wish those children had not gone the other night! Phoebe must have had the infection then. And Bessy, too, coming this morning; it is very unfortunate, with all these people in the house. And Grace Oakenshaw is so delicate; I don’t know what I should do if she were to be ill whilst she was staying with us.”

Agatha was really uncomfortable, yet she could not sympathise with Mrs. Rivers’ fears, and she did not know what to say. Fortunately, there were other subjects which claimed their attention on this bustling day, and scarlet fever was not mentioned again, and appeared to be forgotten.

The evening guests assembled, and the entertainment proceeded merrily. All the parties at Hazel Bank were considered pleasant, and this one formed no exception to the general rule, though some of the family were not in very brilliant spirits, and could not help feeling the blank caused by Hester’s absence.

The only one who thoroughly enjoyed herself was Caroline, now a grown-up young lady, and quite as fond of society and amusement as she had been in her school-days. She was a talkative, high-spirited girl; good-looking, but with less refinement of appearance and manner than either of her elder sisters;

a little inclined to flirtation, but quite innocent of design or manœuvring.

It might be from being brought in contact with Caroline's greater spirits that Katharine seemed more subdued than formerly. She had never been noisy, though always lively and animated, but now her animation evidently required an effort. She danced and talked, but scarcely so heartily as she used to do, and possibly Mr. Percival was not far wrong in thinking that she had more real enjoyment in a quiet conversation with him, whilst pacing up and down one of the garden walks, than in mingling in the gaiety and stir of the dancing-room.

The night was warm, and all the doors and windows were wide open; stray couples wandered about to enjoy the fresh air and the soft, continued summer twilight. Perhaps Katharine thought of that evening four years ago, the first Mr. Wentworth had passed at Hazel Bank.

Agatha was amongst those who sought the cool breeze and the quiet of the garden—Agatha and Philip Thorpe. Neither of them cared to dance; Agatha had changed in many things, but she had not been induced to practise any of the lighter accomplishments and recreations of life, and Philip, unlike as he was to the Philip of former days in externals, had yet not developed—never would develop—should not one rather say *dwindle*?—into a drawing-room man.

So they two walked together; their tall, erect figures clearly seen from the drawing-room windows as they moved along the most conspicuous garden walk with stately steps, utterly regardless of all comments that might be made, and not shrinking from observation into by-paths.

Mrs. James Thorpe called attention to them, and assured Miss Penrose, who was standing with her at the window, that they had been walking together through two polkas and a quadrille; did it not look like something?

Miss Penrose agreed, but did not understand Miss Marchmont; she did not think she would lead a person on without meaning anything, and yet she should think she was too proud to marry into any but a county family.

“Oh, as to that,” said Sophia, “I have heard her as good as declare that no family was good enough to mate with the Marchmonts, and that she never meant to change such a noble name for an inferior one. What do you think of that, Mr. Fenton?” she added, pouncing upon the Coverdale clergyman for an opinion, as he approached the window. “What sort of a sentiment do you consider it, for a young lady to say she will never change her name because it is superior to all others? Do you think it right for a husband to assume his wife’s name? For my part I think it is quite reversing a woman’s destiny. Would you change your name for your wife’s?”

Mrs. James Thorpe was always fond of giving general subjects a personal application, and obliging people to declare how they would act in an imaginary case. Mr. Fenton was aware of this peculiarity, and evaded a direct answer, allowing her, however, to suppose that he did not consider a person's previous resolutions on such subjects of much importance, and that circumstances might arise, in which even Miss Marchmont would be content to waive her aristocratic pretensions, and subside into a Mrs. with a plebeian name.

Meanwhile Agatha and Philip walked and talked, but without making any approaches to that love-making conversation which Mrs. James Thorpe, and persons like her, imagine to be a necessary ingredient in a *tête-à-tête* between a young man and a young woman. It would be difficult to say what was the particular attraction which led them to each other's society, or to determine precisely what opinion each had of the other. They had naturally become somewhat intimate through their mutual business concerns; they had kept up a pretty frequent correspondence, and Philip during his visits home, had always much to tell Agatha about Grey-
more.

She was not insensible to the great change, or rather development, which had taken place in him, and there was something in his late-acquired dignity of manner, his manly steadiness of thought and

purpose, and his earnestness even in subjects which seemed to her unworthy of earnestness, that was not without attraction for her peculiar character.

One might suppose there was an answering chord within her own mind, though the objects of their respective interests were different, or rather had been different, for Agatha was now beginning to see the use and dignity of many things which she had before despised; still *only beginning*, and warring in a half-proud, defiant way against new convictions. To allow Philip Thorpe to conquer her prejudices! All her old haughty nature rose against the idea.

But there was another thing that brought Philip before Agatha's thoughts more frequently than was quite agreeable to her. She could not forget the incident which had connected him with the lost letter, and she could not remember it without feeling humbled in her own eyes. She had stooped to ask him to conceal the letter, and to receive it afterwards furtively. In vain she said to herself that Philip's opinion was of no consequence to her; she could not help conjecturing what conclusions he had drawn from her conduct on that occasion; she could not help wondering whether he still remembered her confusion, and her desire to avoid observation.

He had been true to his word and his innate gentlemanly feeling, and from that day to this had never referred to the subject; but still she was

convinced he must have speculated upon her reasons, in requiring concealment about what appeared so simple a matter. How very awkward she had been in managing that first deception of hers ! Perhaps, in judging her conduct, her very clumsiness may be considered as some excuse for her, since it showed that whatever she might be led to do in a moment of violent emotion, systematic falsehood formed no part of her nature. But, notwithstanding all uncomfortable associations with Philip, Agatha felt as if, from his connection with Greymore, he in some way belonged to her and her real existence more than any one else did, and in conversation with him about her old, well-loved home, she became animated and eloquent, to a degree that would have astonished those accustomed to talk with her only on ordinary topics.

Philip had now long been used to this, and had so long seen the more genuine, more loveable part of her character, that he had almost forgotten how cold and rigid he had formerly thought her.

He was not unconscious of her pride and self-will, but he knew, perhaps better than any one, that there was room in her heart for sentiments of a softer, gentler description ; and the reserve which could hide them, and the steadiness which could concentrate them, did not lessen his appreciation, being greatly in harmony with his own disposition.

From all which thoughts and facts, it will be

concluded that Philip Thorpe and Agatha Marchmont were falling in love with each other. If they were, it was in a peculiar manner, and a very unconscious one; at any rate, on Agatha's side. She would have started in astonishment and mortification at such a suggestion.

"If affairs go on as they do at present," said Philip, after a little business talk, "you will soon be able to carry out your intention of living at Greymore; that is, if you still persist in it."

"I have not changed, most certainly," said Agatha; "it is still the hope of my life to live there."

Philip was silent for a few minutes, then he said—

"I cannot help remembering a speech of yours long ago, when you and I had scarcely exchanged a dozen words together. It was the day of that picnic affair at Brakely: you said something about living alone, about being the last Marchmont; do you recollect?"

"I know what I must have said, though I forget the particular circumstance," said Agatha; "my opinion on that point has never varied. I am the last Marchmont, and my only ambition is to live and die at Greymore."

"Do you remember what was said about changing names?—a husband taking his wife's name?"

"I have a slight remembrance of something of the kind, but the subject is of no importance to me;

I shall never try the experiment, or ask any man to change his name for mine."

"I know you said you would not marry, and I believed you, as I should not have done any of the other girls there," said Philip; "but I have been puzzled since, and fancied you might have changed your mind."

"What have you ever seen in me to make you think so?" said Agatha, rather sharply, and turning round to face him with her large, defiant eyes.

Philip returned her look very calmly.

"Not very much, perhaps," he said; "it is not very easy to think of what people call falling in love in connection with you, and you have not given me permission to allude to the only circumstance that—but I have said too much already. I did not mean this when I began to talk; let us return to the Greymore subject."

"No," said Agatha; "I will know what you suspect, what you think of me. I know what circumstance you mean. You are thinking of that letter you once found, and which I would not receive in public. Pray, speak out your thoughts."

In spite of herself she trembled as she spoke, and her lips grew white.

"There is no occasion to do so," said Philip, "and I have done wrong in even alluding to it. I see from your manner that you guess how I interpreted

your wish for secrecy, therefore the reason for my being puzzled is plain."

"I scarcely imagined you suspected me of keeping up a clandestine correspondence—a silly girl's love-affair," said Agatha; "I see that is what you mean. However, I dare say I was unreasonable: I could not expect you to understand me."

"I understood you so far that I was puzzled to reconcile the impression I then received with everything else concerning you," said Philip; "but, as I said before, I have no business to talk of this; I have no right, and ought to have no wish, to investigate your conduct. From any other woman, such a proceeding would not have surprised me, and kept me all these years in a continued curiosity."

"It can be of no consequence to you," said Agatha. "I had hoped you would dismiss the matter without speculation; but still I feel that, in justice to myself, I must not let you keep a false impression. The letter you found was no love-letter of mine."

Agatha stopped: she could not say more without betraying her secret. Mortifying as it was to be suspected of carrying on a clandestine love-affair, was not her real conduct much worse than anything Philip imagined? Greatly as she disliked to leave that impression on his mind, could she say anything to give him a more favourable one?

"Do not say any more," said Philip. "I have no

right to ask ; and as to my impression your single word is enough to destroy it. I was a fool indeed to imagine such a thing with respect to you, and you have told me I was wrong. That is quite sufficient, for I know whatever else you may be, you are perfectly true. I am quite ashamed of a suspicion that must make me contemptible in your eyes, and I am convinced that if you were at liberty to make a full explanation, I should be still more ashamed of ever having fancied that you had an unworthy motive for your concealment."

Philip did not often speak in a strain so complimentary, but in truth it was not really complimentary, but his simple conviction. He was vexed with himself for his seeming interference, and anxious to make amends.

But Agatha—again to hear such false praises! People would persist in thinking her so true. What a hypocrite she must be! At that moment she felt more thoroughly humbled at the remembrance of her falsehood than ever she had done: still, *shame*, not *grief*, was the predominant emotion.

Philip's speech greatly impressed her, and raised him in her opinion, and yet to be esteemed by him so far beyond her merits overpowered her; for one moment she felt impelled to tell him how far he was mistaken—to beg him to blame, to scorn her, anything rather than to believe her what she was not. But the noble impulse was transient; her pride

could not brook the exposure, the laying bare her secret heart before him.

Her equanimity had been too much disturbed, however, for ordinary conversation to be possible, and she soon proposed returning to the house.

As Agatha entered the dancing-room, she saw Katharine seated at the piano, playing polkas; Mr. Percival had not joined the dancers, but was sitting near her, a little behind the piano, and was bending forward to speak to her from time to time. Agatha was reminded of the old days when she had often seen Mr. Wentworth occupying the same position. But though Katharine spoke and smiled pleasantly, she did not look as she had then looked, and Agatha had learned to understand her too well to construe any part of her present manner into a sign of preference; well enough, even not to blame her: was it Katharine's fault if her manner appeared so agreeable to those who were trying to please her? Undoubtedly a strong wish to please had a great share in moulding her demeanour, but general amiability and unusual power of sympathy had more.

It was much for Agatha to allow that this agreeability was not flirting; but in reality there was a change in Katharine herself, as well as in Agatha's estimate of her, since the time when she had been accused of the latter propensity; a change slight and undefined, but still a change.

Agatha had become so accustomed to watch Ka-

tharine, that she did so almost unconsciously to the end of the evening; she saw her dance with Mr. Percival, or rather stand up to do so, for he was no great dancer, and, after a round or two, contrived to stand talking in a doorway; she saw her busy in getting up quadrilles, that every one might join, and busiest of all in arranging a final Sir Roger de Coverley. Even Agatha herself was induced to take part in this, in honour of Hester's wedding-day, and danced it with Mr. Fenton. No one was left out; both Mr. and Mrs. Rivers danced, and greatly distinguished themselves; mamma being pronounced far more agile and *au fait* in this dance than her daughters.

Little Fanny, no longer so very little, danced with her uncle Thorpe, who was also wonderfully skilful and brisk, and pushed about Philip most unmercifully, Philip being still almost as stupid at dancing as he was at cards. Every one seemed to enjoy the dance; the servants who were looking through the windows, especially admiring the juvenile lightness of their mistress, and only regretting the absence of Miss Bessy Thorpe, whose dancing, when she condescended to exhibit it, was a treat to witness, a model of old-fashioned stepping and curtseying, and graceful bobbings around.

Finally, the party outside took to dancing themselves on the grass-plot, as a fitting termination to Miss Hester's marriage festivities.

When the guests had departed, and those who were staying in the house had retired to their rooms, the different members of the family remained in the hall for a few moments, to exchange remarks according to custom, about the way in which everything had “gone off.”

“Oh, dear, I am so tired,” sighed Fanny; “I wish somebody would carry me to bed.”

“Poor child! it is very late for you to be up,” said Mrs. Rivers, “but you know you begged to stay.”

“Oh, yes, mamma! besides, I am old enough to stay up to the last now, but uncle Thorpe did swing me round so.”

“And Katharine there looks like a ghost,” said Henry. “I vote we all say good-night, at once. I don’t think many of you will appear at breakfast to-morrow.”

“Well, it has been a very satisfactory day, after all,” said Caroline. “When I am married, I hope we shall have as good a wedding, but unfortunately I should miss the dance myself.”

“You will never have such a wedding as Hester’s, you may rely upon it, Carry,” said Henry. “Don’t *you* expect to pick up a Leonard Merivale.”

“Indeed, I do not wish it,” said Caroline. “He does not suit my taste, though very well for a brother-in-law.”

“Well, children, don’t dispute, but go to bed at

once," said Mrs. Rivers. "You have not shut the piano yet, have you, Katharine?"

"No, mamma," replied Katharine; and after "good-nights" had been said, she returned to the drawing-room as the others were mounting the stairs.

Agatha alone lingered in the passage, and a moment or two afterwards went to the drawing-room door.

Katharine was leaning against the still open piano, her face buried in her hands, and her frame heaving with convulsive sobs.

Agatha understood, at any rate in part, how it was; the excitement of the day was over, and the loss of Hester was making itself vividly felt. She would have to return to her chamber, which, though shared for the present by Grace Oakenshaw, would henceforth be silent and solitary; no Hester would be there with whom to exchange impressions and opinions on the occurrences of each day as it passed; no Hester to whom to impart little cares and annoyances, and from whom to receive love, and advice, and confidence. And this was not all, as Agatha had a vague suspicion.

Present sorrow revives that which has gone before; another night of pain and bitterness now rose before Katharine's remembrance; another night when she had lingered in this very spot, associated with so many thoughts, and looks, and speeches; a night when her heart had seemed bursting with shame and

grief. How long ago it appeared, and yet how near and present—the grief, not the shame. Katharine had long cast that aside; she now esteemed it no disgrace to have bestowed her affection; she believed that she had been loved in return, and that Marmaduke Wentworth, if he had read her heart, had neither ridiculed nor despised her; she believed that circumstances, unknown to her, had alone made his conduct apparently strange and capricious. Some time, perhaps, all would be made clear; meantime she must hope and trust. But that *meantime*, how long it seemed! Would the end ever come? Now, when many things combined to depress her, Katharine's hope and trust nearly failed her, and she shed tears of agony, such as she had rarely shed in her happy life.

And Agatha, standing by the door, watching a sister's sorrow, could have brought her hope and consolation—had even in her possession a talisman to change mourning into joy.

And yet, she hung aloof.

Judge her not too hastily, for she too suffers,—at this very moment longing to throw herself into Katharine's arms, to declare her love for her, and to strive to fill the missing sister's place; her heart throbbing with intense affection, yet compelled to crush it back, not daring to offer it, knowing herself burdened with a hateful secret, which, if disclosed, might render her an object of abhorrence.

Katharine made a slight movement, as if rousing herself to close the piano, and Agatha turned away and went upstairs to her room. But she waited near the door till Katharine's slow, weary footstep had passed, and the door of her own room had shut behind her. Then she went to a table, opened her desk, and took out the memorable letter.

Very yellow and faded it was now; why did Agatha look at it? she knew its shape and semblance perfectly; at any moment she could call it before her mind's eye, with its much-stained cover, its half-effaced direction, and the little rent in the corner, where it had caught upon the wood. Why did she take it from its hiding-place, and gaze on it so intently, and even weep over it? Had she any idea of at length giving it up?

If so, it remained merely an idea at present; for Agatha, after some minutes, restored the unconscious bit of paper to the place where it had so long rested.

Many a time she had gazed upon it, and wept over it, as she had done to-night, nay, she had even learnt to consider the doing so a sort of penance; she was, as has been before said, rather prone to rest on mere forms and observances, and she had, perhaps, half-cheated herself into thinking that she was thus showing her penitence. But could that be real penitence which did not prompt her to make the only possible amends for her fault? Had Agatha belonged to a church where confession was enjoined, she fancied

it would have been easier to her. To an ordained priest, raised by his office, as it were, above the passions and follies of humanity, she could have bowed in reverence, and acknowledged that she had erred; but to a girl, one younger than herself, one who had hitherto had reason to respect her, she could not bear to own herself guilty, and to forfeit all claim to either esteem or affection in future.

As to Mr. Wentworth, whom she considered the original cause of all her errors, she only remembered him with pain, or sometimes even with loathing. It appeared incredible that for his sake she should have acted in a way so unlike herself, and so beneath her principles—incredible that for him she should have felt anything like love.

And thus, long after the rest of the household were wrapt in sleep, these two sisters, who might have been so much to each other, thought and grieved in their respective solitudes, each unconscious of what the other was feeling. One of them sad and sorrowful, yet free from remorse; the other a prey to strangely contending passions; distracted by mortified pride and desire for sympathy, a longing to show her real affection, and a dread of sacrificing the false esteem in which she was held. Which was most to be pitied?

CHAPTER XII.

ILLNESS IN THE HOUSEHOLD.—A VIGIL.

BREAKFAST next morning was, as Henry had anticipated, an irregular desultory sort of meal.

Katharine and Agatha were amongst those who appeared the earliest, though probably their share of sleep had been the smallest. Neither of them looked very different from usual. Agatha was naturally strong, and fatigue made little impression upon her, and the constant paleness of her complexion did not give scope for much change of colour, or rather for any decrease of it, to be noticed.

Katharine was rather heavy-eyed, but her face did not bear the wearied, worn expression of last night; her habitually cheerful sanguine temperament rose perseveringly against the pressure of sorrow, and had not been crushed even by years of "hope deferred."

She made breakfast, and greeted the stragglers, who appeared at intervals, with the open, blithe smile that made her unpretending features so attractive, and she replied gaily to Mr. Percival's remarks.

He had not much longer to stay, for he had promised to go to Somerford to-day, to make some arrangements for Mr. Merivale, and the next morning he was to start for London.

Yet he lingered near Katharine as long as breakfast remained on the table, and afterwards lounged away an hour or two in the garden, which was as favourite a resort with most people on this unsettled day as it had been yesterday.

Possibly he waited for the chance of some private conversation with Katharine, but she was never alone, and at length he departed. It was late in the morning when Caroline made her appearance, and even then Fanny did not accompany her.

“I cannot think what is the matter with that child,” she said, as she joined Katharine in the garden; “she is so restless and tosses about, and yet she will not get up.”

“I suppose she is over-tired,” said Katharine; “but I will go and tell her that she will be more refreshed by getting up than by staying in bed.”

Katharine went upstairs immediately, and as soon as she saw Fanny felt convinced that she was far from well, and, instead of persuading her to get up, she tried to make her more comfortable where she was.

Fanny, though she had outgrown the age for being a pet, and was shortly to go to school and commence a career of young-ladyhood, was still to

Katharine a complete child, and their mutual relation of pupil and teacher caused these two sisters to look upon each other in rather a different manner from what they might have done under other circumstances.

Fanny, though not remarkable for veneration, treated Katharine with a sort of clinging dependence as well as fondness, and Katharine's behaviour to Fanny was a mingled compound of motherly and sisterly kindness. They were, in truth, deeply attached to each other, and Fanny, who had answered Caroline's questions in a pettish, indifferent manner, now spoke to Katharine gently and submissively.

Her head ached, she said, and her limbs ached, and her throat was dry and burning, and she thought, but she was not sure, that it was sore, and she was altogether hot and uncomfortable. Katharine's thoughts flew to the reports she had heard about scarlet fever, and, though she did not say a word to Fanny, she determined that not one of the family should have any communication with her until a doctor had seen her.

At present she simply bathed her face and head, and arranged her pillows, and shut out the dazzling sunshine which Caroline had recklessly admitted, and, promising to return soon and bring her something cool to drink, she left Fanny to repose. She then went into her own room to consider what was to be done; no one knew better than she did the

nervous anxiety of her mother where her children were concerned, and she dreaded to tell her her fears about Fanny. Without settling the question whether scarlet fever was infectious or not, Katharine decided that it was safest to act as if it were so, and that the best thing to be done now was to clear the house of visitors. Even if Fanny should prove the only invalid of the family, they would be better out of the way, and until they were she did not like to mention her suspicions to her mother, knowing that, in the present state of the household, Mrs. Rivers would feel overwhelmed by the anticipations that would rush upon her.

The guests who were now in the house were the Simpsons, Grace Oakenshaw, and Leonard Merivale's young cousin. About the former there was not much difficulty, for they had only remained for the night, on account of the distance from Kinsford, and they would leave during the day; but Grace Oakenshaw and Rosa Merivale were permanent visitors. The question was how to get rid of them, and yet not send them to their homes with a chance of carrying infection with them? Had Hester been here, she might have been consulted, and her steady, clear sense would have been a great help; but Hester, alas, was far away.

Caroline would probably be flighty and alarmed, and fancy that she herself was beginning to be ill, if she were taken into confidence; there only re-

mained Agatha upon whom to place any dependence. Katharine looked out of the window; Agatha was not in the garden; it was probable, therefore, that she was in her own room, or rather in the room just now appropriated by her, for in the crowded state of the house she had given up her own, only stipulating to have the small room adjoining for herself exclusively. Here Katharine found her writing and studying as usual; she had tried to entertain the visitors downstairs, but had become quite weary of the task, and had left it to Caroline, thinking her fully equal to the duty of amusing a party of giddy girls. She looked surprised when she saw Katharine; still more so when she heard her first words:—

“I want to consult you, Agatha.”

“What is the matter?” asked Agatha.

“Nothing very serious, I hope, but still I cannot help being afraid. You know scarlet fever is in the neighbourhood?”

“Yes; Miss Bessy Thorpe feared her maid had taken it: that was the reason she did not come last night.”

“Phoebe!” exclaimed Katharine; “that only confirms my fears, for Fanny saw her the other evening. Fanny is not well this morning, and I do not like what she says of her throat; and she is very hot and thirsty and restless. What do you think?”

“All this sounds suspicious, certainly,” said

Agatha ; “ but I know more of illness than you do ; I will go and see her.”

“ No, no,” said Katharine ; “ I do not want any one to see Fanny till Dr. Selby has been here.”

“ I have no fear of infection,” said Agatha, with a half-smile.

“ No, I dare say not ; but other people have, and therefore it is best to isolate Fanny as much as possible, don’t you see ? The great point is to get our visitors away before mamma knows anything about it.”

“ The Simpsons are going as soon as they have had some luncheon,” said Agatha ; “ I heard your mother ordering it.”

“ Yes ; but what is to be done about Grace Oakenshaw and little Rosa Merivale ? We cannot send them off to their homes at a moment’s notice, and yet the sooner they are out of the house the better.”

“ Miss Oakenshaw is such a friend of yours, you might explain to her, and I should think she would propose going home immediately, and perhaps she could take the other girl with her.”

“ But they might carry the infection,” said Katharine ; “ or, at any rate, people might think they did. Besides, the Oakenshaws and Merivales are not acquainted, and Rosa’s home is too far off for her to reach it to-day, even if she could travel alone. No ; I think it would be a better plan to send them to the

Grange. I know my aunt Thorpe would be delighted to receive them ; and as there are no children or young people in the house, she would not think about the infection—at least, there is only Charles, and, as he was here yesterday, he has been running the same risk as the girls. But how are we to get them there without letting mamma know? I don't want to frighten her to-day, when she is tired and overdone with anxiety."

Agatha paused. She was really sympathising with Katharine's difficulties, and difficulties of this kind prompted her to self-denial.

"I will tell you how it can be managed," she said, presently. "I will ask Grace and Rosa to go out walking with me, and I will take them to the Grange. When there, I will ask Mrs. Thorpe to let them stay. I can leave them as if merely for the day, and at night, should Fanny's illness really prove to be scarlet fever, their things can be sent to them. If not, they can come back as if nothing had happened. There is no occasion for you to see them before we start."

"But you had better give Grace some little hint of what is the matter on the way," said Katharine; "she will think it odd for you to contrive to leave her at the Grange, and afterwards she will think my want of confidence unkind. Rosa is young enough to agree, without questions, to any arrangement. But perhaps, Agatha, it would be as well if you were to

stay at the Grange yourself; you would be out of harm's way, and you could send a note."

"Oh, no," said Agatha; "as I told you, I have no fear, and if there should be real illness in the house I could make myself useful."

"It is good of you to undertake this business," said Katharine, "for it is not a sort of thing you particularly like. Walking with the girls, I mean, and visiting at the Grange, and acting in a way that is unavoidably rather deceptive."

Agatha's cheek slightly flushed.

"I should be very selfish to allow any dislikes of that kind to have any influence; besides, it is——" "a pleasure to help you," she was going to add, but she checked herself, and said coldly, instead, "I will go and seek Miss Oakenshaw."

Katharine went to procure the promised cool beverage for Fanny, and then returned to her. After seeing her more settled, and leaving her to sleep if she could, she again repaired to her own room and wrote a note to Dr. Selby, begging him to come as soon as possible, and asking him to enter at the back of the house by the schoolroom door, as she did not wish to alarm her mother at present.

She knew he would understand her and do as she wished, but it was necessary to take some one into her confidence to keep watch for his coming, and admit him when the coast was clear.

She soon found Hannah, told her to send a boy

with the note, and to hover about the back gate herself at the time when Dr. Selby might be expected to arrive.

She had no sooner finished her business than she was summoned to luncheon, which was, in fact, a cold early dinner, slightly hastened, on account of the Simpsons' purposed departure. Some surprise was expressed at the non-appearance of Agatha, Grace, and Rosa.

Katharine explained that they had walked to the Grange.

"It was rather an odd time to go," said Caroline. "They must have known they could not be back before dinner."

"I dare say they will have some dinner at the Grange," said Mrs. Rivers; "and if not, they can dine in the evening with your papa and Henry. I suppose they thought a walk would refresh them after sitting up so late last night. But we are not all here yet; where is Fanny?"

"Fanny is thoroughly tired out," said Katharine, "and she did not feel very well. I told her to try and go to sleep again."

"Poor child! I never missed her before; we have seemed so scattered about this morning. I must go and see her presently, if she does not get up."

This, however, Katharine was resolved to prevent. She was very glad when the Simpsons, directly after luncheon, took leave. Nothing had yet been heard

of Dr. Selby, and she was becoming anxious for his arrival. In order to prevent her mother from going to Fanny's room, she went herself, and reported on her return that Fanny was asleep; suppressing, however, the fact that she was moaning and tossing about.

"And indeed, mamma," she added, "I think it would be the best plan for you to have a sleep likewise; you look quite worn out."

"I am tired, certainly. What time is it?"

"About half-past three. You can never keep up till bedtime, I am sure, mamma."

"Well, I will go and lie down for a short time. I know there were some things I meant to do this afternoon, but I shall get up again before tea."

"Never mind them, mamma. Nearly everything is in order now, and I can do the rest. Do go and sleep quietly."

Mrs. Rivers went, and everything was now clear for Dr. Selby's arrival, even if he chose to come in the front way, for the boys were out, and Caroline had established herself luxuriously on the drawing-room couch with a book.

He, however, strictly obeyed Katharine's wishes, and she had just gone into the schoolroom to wait for him, when Hannah entered by the garden door, and said that he was following.

Katharine soon explained to him the cause of her sending for him, and took him up to Fanny's room.

She was now awake, and complained much of her

throat. Dr. Selby looked at Katharine, but said nothing. When they had left the room and were again in the little study, he said,—

“You are quite right; Fanny has scarlet fever, and will have, perhaps, rather a sharp attack.”

“But I thought the people about had been having it mildly,” said Katharine.

“Yes; there have been no fatal cases. I don’t mean that I anticipate anything of that kind for Fanny. Only it is real scarlet fever, not simple scarletina. I am telling you this, because she will require much nursing and watching. I know you don’t want to alarm Mrs. Rivers just now, when she is over-tired, but Fanny must not be neglected on that account. You must have some one to watch her and attend upon her to-night.”

“Oh! I can manage that easily, by sitting up with her myself,” said Katharine.

“You! why, you danced last night enough to tire a horse, to say nothing of talking and flirting. I cannot compliment you on your appearance to-day; you don’t look fit for much.”

“I am much less tired than you think,” said Katharine; “and all the servants have had more to tire them than I have had. I could not ask any of them to sit up, and I do not like to send for any one else without mamma’s knowledge.”

“Well, one of your sisters might take half the night for you,” said Dr. Selby.

“But mamma is so afraid of infection, and I am the only person who has seen Fanny since morning. Would it not be better to keep her quite apart from the rest?”

“Nonsense; they have all been with her since she caught the disease; however, settle it as you like, only take care of yourself, or I shall have to doctor you; and we shall have that tall, long-headed barrister in the fidgets. Don’t forget my directions about Fanny, but I need not tell you that.”

The doctor departed, leaving comfort behind him in the last echoes of his cheerful voice. Katharine returned to Fanny, and stayed with her till tea-time, wondering a little that Agatha had not yet made her appearance. She ventured once to peep into her mother’s room, and found her sleeping. Of course she determined not to wake her, and only hoped that she would sleep so long, it would not be worth while to get up at all during the evening.

Meanwhile, Mr. Rivers and Henry came home from Fairfield, and Willie from cricket; the family were seated at a miscellaneous collation, tea and dinner, when Agatha entered the room.

“Dear me! what have you done with Grace and Rosa?” asked Caroline.

“They are spending the evening at the Grange,” said Agatha.

“I suppose Philip will drive them home, then,” said Mr. Rivers.

“He has returned to Greymore,” said Agatha; “at least, I have just left him on his way to the station.”

“Charlie will bring them back, I dare say,” remarked Caroline; “but I wonder you did not stay too, Agatha, and all come home together.”

Agatha made no reply, but turned to Katharine and asked for some tea.

“You look very hot; have you been walking fast?” inquired Caroline.

“Not very, but it is a warm evening,” replied Agatha, as she untied her hat, and carried it and her mantle into the passage. She returned to the table without making any further alteration in her toilette, and as soon as tea was over she left the room. Katharine followed her in a few minutes, and found her in her own room.

“Well, it is scarlet fever, I suppose,” said Agatha, as Katharine entered.

“Yes; fortunately, mamma is asleep, and need not know till morning.”

“Then we must send those girls their clothes,” said Agatha. “I told Mrs. Thorpe your suspicions about Fanny, and she said directly they must stay at the Grange.”

“I was sure she would,” said Katharine. “Did you tell Grace how it was?”

“I was obliged to do so,” said Agatha; “she was so surprised at my proposing a walk to the Grange. She was not afraid of the infection as I expected, but she quite agreed that it was best for her and little Miss Merivale to be out of the house. As for the latter, I left her in great delight amongst the wonders of the farmyard, and I dare say she will be very glad when she hears that she is to stay. But tell me how Fanny really is, though I may as well go and see for myself.”

“There is no occasion for you to go into the room, Agatha,” said Katharine. “Dr. Selby says Fanny will have a rather sharp attack, but nothing to actually frighten us.

“I shall certainly go into the room at one time or other,” said Agatha, “and I see no reason why I should not go now. I have been amongst people who had scarlet fever before.”

“But at present,” said Katharine, “it would be much better if you would send off Grace and Rosa their boxes. Caroline can help you, for it is no use keeping everything from her now. And when the things are ready, I will send a note with them to aunt Thorpe. I will write it now if you will give me some paper; I suppose I may open your desk?”

Agatha almost shuddered as Katharine sat down to the table and drew the desk towards her. Of course there was not the slightest chance of her seeing the letter concealed in it, but yet Agatha felt a nameless

horror at the thought that she was so near it. The sisters had been so much apart, as regarded all their possessions and habits, that Katharine had never used Agatha's writing materials before.

"I will write the note myself," said Agatha, hastily. "You have plenty to do, I know, Katharine."

Somewhat astonished at the offer, Katharine agreed to it, and left the room. Agatha began her note, the first she had ever written to Mrs. Thorpe, and she half smiled as she considered the many unlikely things she had done this day.

It had been purely for the sake of saving Katharine trouble that she had volunteered to walk to the Grange in the morning: she was not particularly fond of a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Thorpe, though she appreciated her more than formerly, and yet to-day she had been on quite confidential terms with her, entering into arrangements, and consulting her on a matter known only to Katharine and herself. Mrs. Thorpe, on her side, had been rather surprised at finding Miss Marchmont taking an active interest in family affairs: she knew, indeed, that for some time she had seemed to belong to the others more than she used to do, but still she was not quite prepared to find her acting in concert with Katharine. She thought that Katharine would have been more likely to seek the assistance of Caroline, and she now half blamed herself for never having done sufficient justice to Agatha, and in consequence she treated her with

unusual cordiality. She would not hear of her leaving the Grange before dinner, and assured her that it would appear odd if she were to go home without Grace and Rosa; why, indeed, should she not stay altogether? why expose herself to infection without any cause?

“Indeed, I must return,” said Agatha; “I want to see Katharine, and hear all about Fanny; but if you like, I will stay till afternoon, and I can report when I go home that I have left the others for the evening. No one will wonder at their stay, for Rosa Merivale was wishing to see a farmyard the other day, and there was some proposal made about bringing her to see the various occupations going on in yours.”

“Very well; you know best, I dare say,” returned Mrs. Thorpe; “and now we had better go in, for it is dinner-time, and they will wonder what we are about.”

This conversation had been carried on in the dial-garden, where Mrs. Thorpe and Agatha had fancied themselves alone. Now, however, Philip made his appearance; he had been reading on his favourite bench under the elder-trees, and they had been too much engaged to observe him. He joined Agatha as she was going into the house, and said,—

“I am going to Greymore to-night, and I want some conversation with you before you go home. I heard from the works this morning; so don’t leave the house without telling me. I can walk with you and explain on the way.”

Agatha nodded in affirmation, but had not time to

speak, for Mr. Thorpe, who was in the passage, came up to greet her.

She could not get away in the afternoon so soon as she expected ; it was a hot day, and Mrs. Thorpe would not hear of her walking home till the sun was lower.

“ Besides,” she added, “ I hear Philip has sent off his luggage, and means to walk to the station, so he can leave you at Hazel Bank on the way, and there is no use in starting so early that he will have to wait an hour or two for the train.”

As Agatha had previously agreed to walk with Philip, she could not object to the delay, or urge him to leave home sooner than necessary ; so the shadows of evening were beginning to fall when they commenced their walk.

Agatha was the first to speak, by reminding Philip that he had something to tell her. He immediately agreed, and a very business-like discussion followed, which need not be related here, as iron-mines and money-making have no connection with this story, except so far as they influence the characters and thoughts of Philip and Agatha.

Before they reached Hazel Bank the subject was exhausted, and silence ensued. Agatha could not help thinking of what Philip had said last night, and she felt awkward and constrained. In vain she told herself that his opinion was of no consequence to her ; she could not bear him to have a wrong

idea of her; and his exaggerated praise of her truthfulness was as bad as his previous suspicion of her folly. Philip, by a strange coincidence, was thinking about the same thing; he had expressed himself satisfied without explanation, yet the subject continued to haunt him. He recalled Agatha's agitation at the memorable epoch referred to last night, and he could not repress a wish to know the history of the letter which had so long puzzled him. Agatha was a mystery to him in some respects, and though angry with himself for wasting so much thought upon her, he found himself for ever recurring to all that was perplexing in her behaviour.

He had been strangely pleased to-day, when she had come to the Grange so unexpectedly, and talked so confidentially with his mother; he had avoided listening to their conversation, but he had seen from their manner that it was earnest and friendly, and it was something new and wonderfully delightful to fancy them on such terms. His mother had since told him, privately, the cause of Agatha's visit, and the whole affair seemed to place her in a different light before him.

He knew before that she was warm-hearted and affectionate, when once her reserve was penetrated; but something seemed now to assure him that her nature was expanding, and that the better feelings of her heart were coming into full play.

“You will write soon and tell me how affairs are going on,” said Agatha, at length, wishing to break the awkward silence.

“Yes,” said Philip, “I will write the day after I arrive at Greymore; I wish you were going yourself, and could see everything.”

Philip had often expressed this wish before, and Mr. Rivers had even arranged plans for taking her, but hitherto she had always objected. So long as the Maynards were living in the old Priory, she shrank from the thought of visiting the place.

“I am afraid I should not appreciate the changes,” said she. “Amidst all your blasting, and smelting, and other operations, I should scarcely know the quiet hill-side I was so fond of.”

“You would find plenty of quiet spots left,” said Philip; “and the house, too, is free from your tenants at present, or will be directly; they are going away for a few months.”

“But it is under their rule still,” said Agatha, “and everything would look so different to me.”

“But many things cannot change; and even the changes would not strike you long.”

“I do not easily forget,” said Agatha.

“I know that; you are one of the most constant persons I ever met.”

Agatha did not answer; she was not sure that in some respects the versatile Katharine was not more constant than herself.

“And when you answer my letter,” pursued Philip, a minute later, “I shall expect to hear how you are going on at Hazel Bank, and if Fanny’s illness really is scarlet fever: it will be a sad affair if it goes through the family.”

“You will hear soon enough from your mother, if that be the case,” said Agatha.

“But she cannot tell so much as you, who will be in the house. I know you will make a point of nursing those who are ill, and I shall be anxious to hear how you are yourself.”

“Shall you?” asked Agatha, rather absently.

“Yes; I know you well enough to care whether you are ill or well,” said Philip; “though I don’t think you believe me.”

“I shall try to help if they are ill, certainly,” said Agatha; “but Katharine does not seem inclined to let any one share the task of nursing Fanny.”

“Katharine is a good girl,” said Philip; “I am glad you are so friendly.”

Agatha looked up quickly.

“What makes you think we are particularly friendly? We have never been *unfriendly*, I hope; but I do not think we have shown any desire to be especially intimate. I have no reason to suppose that Katharine is greatly attached to me.”

“Perhaps you have not given her much encouragement,” said Philip; “and if so, it is a pity,

for you might do each other good. Katharine might learn many things from you."

"You once thought differently, I fancy," said Agatha.

She was vexed with herself as soon as the words had passed her lips. Philip's dark face flushed.

"I once thought differently about many things," he said. "Katharine opened my eyes about herself long ago, as you must know pretty well, for the subject was freely discussed in the family meetings, besides being the public property of the neighbourhood. After that time I scarcely did her justice, I believe, but now I can acknowledge that she has good qualities, though not of the kind to suit me. She is affectionate, and has as little selfishness as most people, but I could not depend upon her. *You* might help her, by giving her steadiness and earnestness."

"Katharine has more of both than you suspect, perhaps," said Agatha, "though I could not undertake to remodel her so as at length to suit your taste," she added, in a tone of banter which sounded unnatural from her, and grated unpleasantly on Philip's ear.

"You need not speak to me in that way of Katharine," he said. "No change in her, no power on earth, could make me think of her as I once did. I do not mean to blame her now, but she once deceived me, or I deceived myself, and adored some-

thing that was not Katharine. Having found out my delusion, is it supposed necessary that it should haunt me for ever? is there no possibility that I should—should have the same kind of feelings again, where there *could* be no delusion? Does one foolish attachment forbid a wise one?"

"I don't know," said Agatha, with apparent indifference.

"Yes, you do know," said Philip, "or you would speak more naturally. But you need not be alarmed; I will not trouble you with the history of my feelings. It is rather an absurd subject for you and me to touch upon, is it not?"

He spoke half angrily, and Agatha's manner showed that she, too, was disturbed. She soon collected herself, and began to talk of iron and the Greymore hills, an unfailing topic of discussion between these two. Something in her tone seemed to throw Philip back into the position of a business agent, who was treated confidentially on matters within his own province, but who had no connection with her private life.

They had by this time nearly reached Hazel Bank, and at the point where the road led off to the station, Agatha made Philip leave her. They shook hands, and after a few formal words of leave-taking, she walked away with the air of a princess.

Turning round a few moments afterwards, for what purpose she scarcely knew, she saw Philip

standing on the spot where they had parted, looking intently after her. As she turned he started, and walked towards the station with rapid steps.

Agatha went home angry, and with confused thoughts, and quite forgetful of Fanny and scarlet fever, till she saw the inquiring look on Katharine's face.

It was no wonder that Caroline thought she had been walking fast, for she looked flushed, a most unusual occurrence with her. Now, however, as she was sitting down to write to Mrs. Thorpe, her countenance had recovered its equanimity and her complexion its steady paleness. She wrote a few matter-of-fact words, sealed her note, and then went in search of Caroline, who had already been told by Katharine of Fanny's illness and the consequent arrangements. Between the two, the packing of Grace's and Rosa's clothes was rapidly accomplished, and their boxes despatched to the Grange.

When Katharine told her father all that she had done with respect to Fanny and the others, he quite approved, and agreed that Mrs. Rivers should be kept in ignorance that night; and, as she did not wake until it was almost time for other people to go to bed, she was easily prevented from making a visit to Fanny's room; and the inquiries she made were not difficult to evade.

Katharine had fully resolved that her mother should have a good night's rest before being told

of a circumstance which would alarm her so much as the fact of having a fever in the house would do, and, as it happened, she was able to carry out her intention easily enough.

The household retired early to rest, Caroline established herself in Katharine's room, and Katharine took her station by Fanny's bedside. The good-natured Hannah had offered to sit up instead of her, but she would not hear of it, partly because she did not wish to deprive her of her rest, partly because she felt sure that the moment Hannah was seated in a comfortable arm-chair, with stillness reigning in the house, she would fall asleep.

Agatha, too, begged to watch instead of Katharine, but Katharine declared that Fanny was not accustomed to her, and would be alarmed by seeing her near her, if she awoke in the middle of the night,—a fact which Agatha could not contradict, as she had not been in the habit of going in and out of the room, like Katharine, at all hours of the day or night.

It was a mild summer night; Katharine placed the light in a corner of the room and drew up the blind. Opening the window just sufficiently to admit the fragrant air from the garden, and wrapping herself in a dressing gown, she seated herself in the window-seat. Fanny appeared to be asleep, and she was near enough to hear her slightest movement.

The perpetual twilight of midsummer allowed her to see distinctly every object in the garden, and to trace the path where she had walked with Mr. Percival last night, and the trees beneath which they had stood.

Last night, when the garden had been filled with voices, and soft speeches or merry words had mingled with the rustling of the leaves. How different it looked now ! how still and solemn !

Other rambles in that garden, more distant and more dear, rose up also in Katharine's memory, and soon her thoughts rested exclusively on that past time, that happy summer of her life, when no idea of change in the family circle had occurred to her, and it had seemed that she and Hester would always be girls together, and Fanny would be always a merry child.

And now Hester was gone, and could never again be to her exactly what she had been, and Fanny could no longer be the pet and plaything of former days. She was ill too, and Katharine's spirit sank at the thought of illness.

True it might not be serious, but illness had seldom crossed the threshold of Hazel Bank, and now that it had done so, who could tell where it might stop ?

Katharine was tired, and she could not help feeling lonely and dejected, but the soothing calm of a summer night soon exerted its power over her.

The solemn stillness which rested on external nature penetrated the depths of her spirit, and thoughts purer, and of less earthly hue than ordinary, stole upon her. She was conscious of a mysterious awe, and she fancied herself surrounded by an invisible, spiritual world, and open to influences to which, in general, her senses were dull.

Katharine was not superstitious, neither was she easily frightened, but when, on slightly turning her head from the window, she saw a tall white figure advancing up the room, she was half tempted to believe herself subject to a vision from that spiritual world, of which she had been dreaming.

A few moments dispelled the illusion : the white-robed visitant proved to be Agatha, who, having waited till the rest of the household were wrapt in sleep, had come to prevent, if possible, or at any rate to share, Katharine's vigil.

"Fanny is asleep, I suppose," she said, in a whisper. "Go and lie down on Caroline's bed, Katharine, and I will watch Fanny."

"You must promise to wake me, then, if she wants anything."

"It seems you cannot trust her to me," said Agatha ; "but if you think I shall frighten her, I will do as you wish."

"At any rate, you must not let me sleep long," said Katharine, with a smile, "or you will get no rest yourself."

“I am not sleepy or tired,” said Agatha; “you need not think of me.”

“Well, it is no use both of us staying awake,” said Katharine; “and as you are here, I will follow your advice, but I don’t suppose I shall fall asleep.” And after repeating to Agatha, Dr. Selby’s directions for Fanny’s treatment, she threw herself on Caroline’s bed, and, in spite of her prediction, was soon sleeping calmly and soundly.

Agatha took the vacant place in the window-seat, and looked out, as Katharine had done, on the sombre, quiet landscape. She had much to think about, but the central figure round which all her thoughts revolved was Katharine,—Katharine, who was daily appearing to her more and more amiable and loveable. Having once begun to appreciate her, Agatha’s really impetuous, though strongly curbed, nature hurried her into all the intensity of a warm attachment.

She was not insensible to Katharine’s failings, and she wished that she might have been able to follow Philip’s suggestions, and help her to conquer them. But how little he knew that she had for ever debarred herself from offering advice or assistance to Katharine. How was it possible even to indulge the affection she felt towards her? Confidential intercourse was unattainable between them, whilst one of them was burdened with a secret so nearly affecting the other—a secret which, if disclosed,

would only widen the breach that already separated them.

No ; she must restrain her warmth, and even when conferring benefits, do so in an unsympathising manner ; otherwise she would either betray the cause of her hitherto constrained behaviour, or become a hypocrite, and gain an affection she did not deserve.

She had been kind to Katharine during this day, kind as far as actions went, but she was aware that all the time she had spoken in a hard, indifferent voice, and suffered it to appear as if she were guided merely by abstract duty, by no motive of sisterly love and thoughtfulness.

And so it must continue ; for if Katharine were to become familiar and caressing, her every word and look would send forth a sting, causing deeper and deeper pangs of self-reproach.

To be loved, really and truly loved, by Katharine, was at once her most longing desire and her greatest dread. To be praised was bad enough, but to be the object of affection from one whom she had deceived, and was deceiving, would be worse.

And yet, with strange inconsistency, she could not bear to give up her deception, and so to lose the portion of liking she believed Katharine granted her ; she could not bear to live without her *respect*.

When she was assured that Katharine was asleep, she stole gently towards the bed, and looked at her.

An intent gaze seems to have some mysterious power over those who sleep; under that of Agatha, Katharine became uneasy and disturbed, and changed her position, so that her face was no longer visible.

Agatha turned away; solitary brooding and excited thought made her fanciful, and, saying to herself, "She feels that I exercise a baneful influence over her; my look seems as if it had power to blight her," she returned to her post by the window.

The moon had now risen, and tinged all around with a faint soft light; the tree-tops stirred gently in the breeze; everything else was still and silent. The contrast between the great calm of nature, and the unresting agitations of her own heart, struck Agatha painfully, and she gave way to a burst of tears, with her an unusual mark of emotion.

Her whole frame heaved with convulsive sobs, for when Agatha *did* weep, it was with an effort; she was not one of those whose tears, easily flowing and quickly wiped away, leave no traces of disturbance; she could seldom weep quietly, never unless joy mingled with the source of her tears. The exertions she now made to subdue every sound of her agitation, mindful even then of her sleeping companions, only made the internal struggle the greater, and she shook and trembled in every limb.

Katharine, whose sleep had been disturbed by Agatha's gaze, was now partially roused by the sound of one or two violent sobs, which Agatha

could not wholly repress, and she opened her eyes and looked, half dreamily, around. She was too much *asleep* to speak, and she did not know whether what she saw was reality or a dream.

Agatha, crouching on the window-seat, her face buried in her hands, her breath coming in quick, short gasps, and her long, irrepressible sobs bursting forth at intervals, appeared a prey to the deepest anguish.

It could not be reality, surely ; the Agatha with whom she had spoken before lying down to rest had been perfectly cool and composed in manner, and certainly in as good spirits as usual. The thought of illness in the family, which had depressed Katharine herself, had not apparently affected Agatha ; she had spoken of it in a matter-of-fact way, had indulged in no anticipatory fears, had shown no sorrow for Fanny's suffering, and had appeared incited to exertion merely by cold duty. What could now shake her very soul in this manner ? It could not be the real Agatha that she saw ; she must be dreaming ; and too sleepy to pursue the argument further in her mind, Katharine closed her eyes and again actually slept.

When she awoke a second time, the room was bright with moonlight, Fanny was still quiet and apparently asleep, and Agatha seated by the window calm and undisturbed, nay, even reading by the light of the moon. The past must certainly have

been a dream. Refreshed by her sleep, Katharine now got up, and sat down by Agatha.

“I gave Fanny her medicine,” said Agatha; “I thought it was no use waking you.”

“Was she surprised to see you?” asked Katharine.

“Yes; she asked where you were, but I soon satisfied her, and told her you were sleeping. She fell asleep again herself very soon.”

“I suppose it will soon be daylight now,” said Katharine. “Had you not better go to bed, Agatha? It is too bad to let you sit up all the night, and I have had enough rest now.”

“I don’t mind it,” said Agatha; “it is rather pleasant than otherwise, and the moonlight is so beautiful.”

“And everything is so still,” said Katharine; “how different from last night! It must be much more wearying to sit up through a winter’s night, lighted by fire and candle. I have never tried it, but I can fancy how sad and dreary it must be.”

“Yes,” said Agatha, in a grave tone, “it is very different.”

“You have tried it?” said Katharine.

“I have sat up many a night at Greymore, with my aunt,” said Agatha. “She died in November, a dreary time.”

There was a pause; but presently Katharine said, with some hesitation,—

“A long time ago, Agatha, you once began to tell me something about your aunt. I have often felt curious since to know her history. Would you mind telling it to me to-night? All is so still and solemn, it seems just the time for a sad story.”

“I cannot, Katharine,” said Agatha, hastily.

“I dare say it is painful to talk about a person you loved so much,” said Katharine, “and yet it seems to me that you would be really happier, just after the first, if you would confide your remembrances and past troubles to some one. Would it not be a relief? Indeed, Agatha, I would listen in no light spirit. Perhaps you think me too thoughtless and unused to sorrow to appreciate what you would tell, but indeed I *can* feel.”

“I believe it,” said Agatha, abruptly, “and my motive for refusing what you ask is not what you think. My sorrow is not too acute now to prevent my speaking, but I do not wish to talk over the past with you, Katharine; I do not wish to confide in any one.”

This answer was so decided that Katharine felt crushed: was it always to continue thus? Even when acting as a member of the family, and seeming on affectionate terms with all, would Agatha still repulse every attempt at particular confidence?

“I remember the time when that conversation took place,” said Agatha, after a short silence. “It was one evening at the close of a rainy day, and

you were sitting in the schoolroom window reading Tennyson. I recollect you expressed a belief in some lines of his which I have since often read. They were on "Love and Duty;" do you remember?"

"Perfectly," said Katharine,—

"Of Love, that never found his earthly close,
What sequel?"

"Yes; you believed in the sentiment, and I did not. I should like to know if years, which bring riper judgment, have changed yours."

Agatha spoke with a manner of assumed playfulness, which sat upon her awkwardly enough, and there was an expression of anxiety on her features, scarcely in accordance with her tone. Katharine did not remark anything unusual; she was occupied with her own feelings, and she said,—

"I still think the same: *true* love makes people happier and wiser, however unfortunate circumstances may appear."

"You would rather have loved, though the object of your love might be dead, or lost to you for ever, than never have loved at all?" said Agatha, eagerly.

"Certainly; a thousand times over," said Katharine. "I imagine all would say the same who have ever——" She stopped, aware that she was betraying herself without her confidence having been sought.

“I could never believe in such a sentiment myself,” said Agatha, lightly.

Katharine’s words gave her a sort of relief, though she could not understand her way of feeling, and she now tried to change the subject.

The gray light of morning succeeded to the brilliant radiance of the moon, and still Agatha and Katharine sat in the window, sometimes conversing in whispers of indifferent things, sometimes keeping perfect silence.

Katharine would willingly have been confidential: Agatha, by sharing the night-watch with her, seemed drawn closer to her, and in the absence of Hester she would gladly have turned to her for something like sisterly intimacy, but it was not to be. Agatha would take part in home duties, and sympathise in family troubles, but she still remained fenced in by an invisible, incomprehensible barrier, which repelled confidence.

And Agatha? She saw that Katharine’s heart was opening towards her, and that any advances on her own part would have met with ready affection; yet she could not, dared not, make them.

And so this summer night, through which they watched together, passed away without bringing them any nearer to each other, and yet it was not without a certain influence on their private thoughts in future. Katharine recurred frequently afterwards to the strange impression she had had of Agatha’s fit of

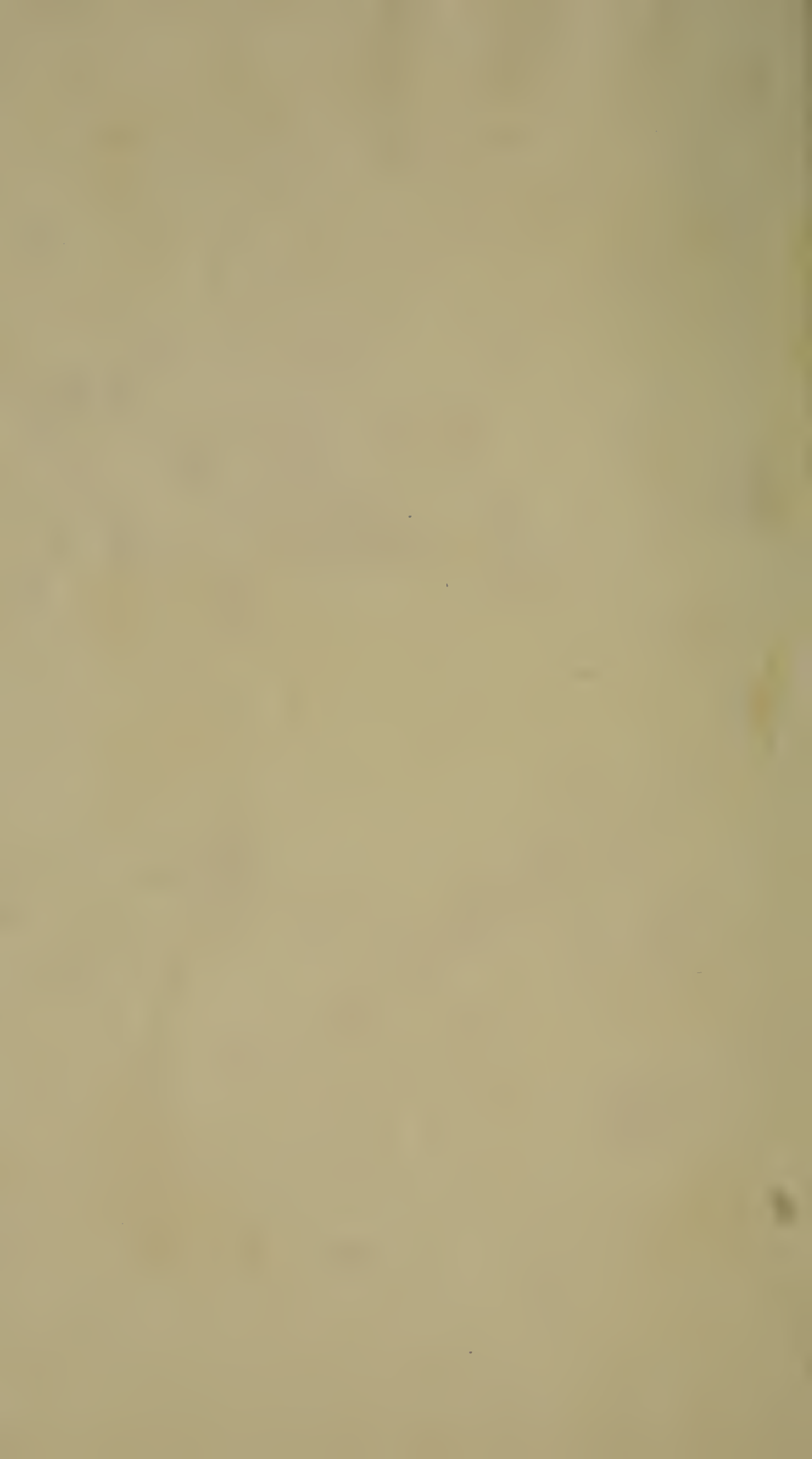
weeping; and Agatha found herself many times considering Katharine's theory of the happiness of true love; rejoicing that Katharine found it real, and wondering whether she herself could ever be brought to experience it likewise. If so, all her former ideas respecting love must have been pure delusions.

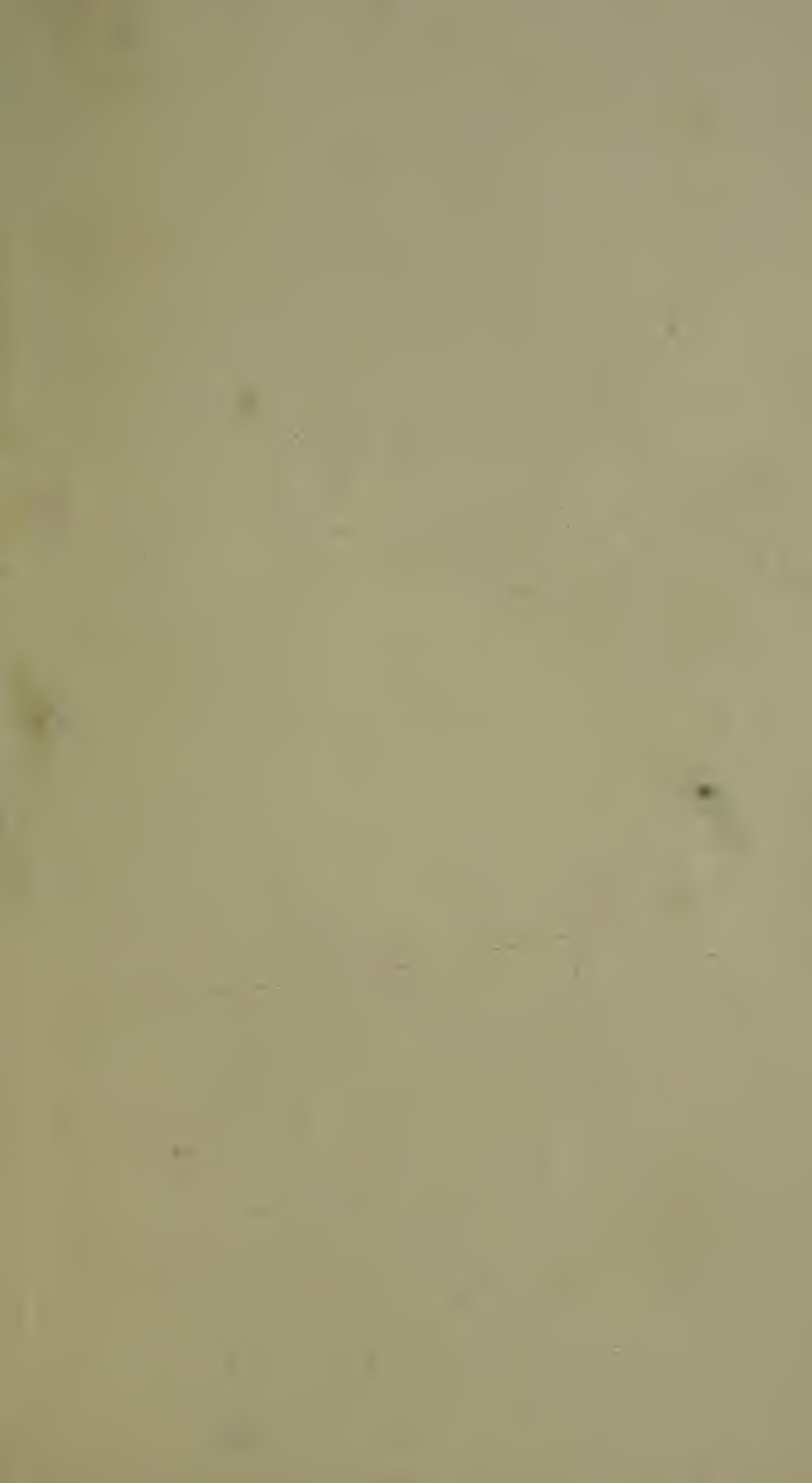
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